



Elina Lassila

**HOW TO INCREASE INTERACTION WITH PROSPECTS IN PROFESSIONAL
BUSINESS TO BUSINESS SERVICES**

Master's Thesis
Department of Marketing
April 2021

Unit Department of marketing			
Author Elina Lassila		Supervisor Satu Nätti	
Title How to increase interaction with prospects in professional business to business services			
Subject Marketing	Type of the degree Master's degree	Time of publication April/2021	Number of pages 83 + 2
<p>Abstract</p> <p>As a result of more complex organisational structures, fast-developing technologies and an increase in internationalisation companies are deciding to focus only on their core competencies and, thus, are buying more and more services to gain different field-specific knowledge. These professional services have also gained attention in research, in which interaction is in a crucial role in creating value. However, the research concentrates mainly on how value is created through interaction for existing customers. Therefore, it is important to investigate how interaction can be increased among prospects when selling professional services.</p> <p>The thesis was commissioned by HR service provider Notarec. The aim of the thesis was to study how interaction can be increased among B2B prospects when buying professional services. The professional services were limited to HR services. The interaction was studied from two aspects: first by defining the pre-purchase customer journeys of B2B prospects and second, to suggest suitable inbound marketing tactics to guide prospects through the stages. The customer journeys were combined based on similarities in buying behaviour to create more general customer profiles for being able to make the inbound marketing suggestions.</p> <p>Qualitative and abductive research methods were utilised in the thesis. A qualitative research method, semi-structured interview was selected since it allows a more conversation-like interview and posing questions about emerging topics during the interviews. Abductive research strategy was chosen due to the qualitative nature of the research and the thesis started with theoretical pre-knowledge that was utilised in creating the research questions. The criteria for selecting research participants were architecture, engineering, and IT companies that have operations in Oulu area. The CEOs of these companies were selected to be interviewed since it was assumed that they have a strong influence when buying professional services.</p> <p>The customer journeys were similar between companies of the same industries. The similarities were seen mostly in how companies wanted to be engaged with and what the problems in HR were. It became evident that due to the nature of the business – professional services – only inbound marketing was not enough to meet the needs of prospects in the pre-purchase customer journey stages, and thus, traditional marketing and relationship marketing were added. The emphasis on the first stages of the pre-purchase stages was on inbound marketing, but on the last stages, also on relationship marketing. The most important tactic of inbound marketing was content marketing, and from relationship marketing, social and structural bonds. Therefore, only implementing inbound marketing is not enough for professional service firms, and thus, they must implement also traditional marketing and relationship marketing to get the best results.</p>			
Keywords Professional services, value creation, customer journey, inbound marketing			
Additional information			

CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION.....	6
1.1	Background of the thesis and research objective	6
1.2	Research gap.....	7
1.3	Research methodology	8
1.4	Structure of the thesis	9
2	PROFESSIONAL SERVICES	10
2.1	Value creation in professional service firms.....	11
2.2	Main elements of professional services	13
3	CUSTOMER JOURNEY	15
3.1	Defining customer journey	18
3.2	Customer journey maps	19
3.3	Customer experience.....	20
3.4	Customer journeys in B2B professional services context.....	21
4	INBOUND MARKETING	23
4.1	Traditional vs inbound marketing.....	24
4.2	Elements of inbound marketing.....	25
4.3	Customer life cycle	26
4.4	Service-dominant logic and value creation	27
4.5	Inbound marketing tactics	28
4.6	Measuring inbound marketing success	31
4.7	Theoretical framework	32
5	RESEARCH METHODS.....	35
5.1	Methodology	35
5.2	Data collection	36
5.2.1	Interview process and design	38

5.3	Data analysis	40
6	RESULTS AND ANALYSIS	42
6.1	Customer journeys of architecture companies.....	42
6.2	Customer journeys of engineering companies.....	47
6.3	Customer journeys of IT consultant companies.....	51
6.4	Customer journeys of IT software development companies	56
6.5	Summary of customer journeys and inbound marketing suggestions	60
6.5.1	Architecture companies	61
6.5.2	Engineering companies	63
6.5.3	IT companies.....	65
7	DISCUSSION	68
8	CONCLUSIONS	74
8.1	Limitations	76
8.2	Suggestions for future research	78
	REFERENCES.....	79
	APPENDICES	84
	Appendix 1 Outline of a semi-structured interview.....	84

FIGURES

Figure 1. VCPs of PSF (adapted from Løwendahl, Revang & Fosstenløkken, 2001).	12
Figure 2. Traditional Customer Journey and Marketing Funnel (adapted from Colicev, Kumar & O'Connor, 2019).	15
Figure 3. Customer journey model (adapted from Deasi, 2016).	17
Figure 4. Theoretical framework.	33
Figure 5. Customer journey model of architecture company X.....	43
Figure 6. Customer journey model of architecture company Y.....	45
Figure 7. Customer journey model of engineering company X.....	47
Figure 8. Customer journey model of engineering company Y.....	49
Figure 9. Customer journey model of IT consultant company X.....	52
Figure 10. Customer journey model of IT consultant company Y.....	54
Figure 11. Customer journey model of IT software development company X.	56
Figure 12. Customer journey model of IT software development company Y.	59

TABLES

Table 1. Differences between traditional and digital inbound marketing (adapted from Vinerean & Opreana, 2015).	24
Table 2. Elements of inbound marketing (adapted from Patrutiu-Baltes, 2016).	26
Table 3. Information of the interviews.	37
Table 4. Customer journey and inbound marketing suggestions for architecture customer profile.	62
Table 5. Customer journey and inbound marketing suggestions for engineering customer profile.	63
Table 6. Customer journey and inbound marketing suggestions for IT customer profile. ..	65

1 INTRODUCTION

In contemporary service research, value creation has gained a great deal of attention, and this value creation view has become an essential way how to portray a service. Value is mainly created through the interaction between the customer and the company. (Grönroos, 2000.) When the interaction takes place, value is created through an exchange of information, which is utilised and consequently, new information and knowledge is created (Berthon & John, 2006). The value creation view also affects the activities of supplier companies before relationships with prospects have been formed. This implies that how the supplier company is able to provide value for the prospect with its activities before forming personal relations. The thesis aims to investigate this through the aspects of customer journey and inbound marketing.

Due to technological advancements and the growing use of digital devices, customer journeys have become increasingly complex, including multiple touch points with the supplier company. This makes managing customer journeys and customer experiences more demanding for the supplier companies. Not only have customer journeys become more difficult, but also how the company's marketing should be done. Marketers today face enormous pressure since customers are becoming less and less interested in traditional marketing. This is shown in studies that prove that the attention span of humans has dropped from 12 seconds in 2000 to 8 seconds in 2013 (Dakouan, Benabdelouahed & Anabir, 2019). Thus, companies must find innovative ways how to attract the attention of customers and earn their trust through the myriad of different channels and medias of today (Dakouan et al., 2019).

1.1 Background of the thesis and research objective

The thesis is commissioned by Notarec - recruitment, HR, and employer branding consultant company. The aim of the research is to investigate how to increase the interaction between the supplier company and its prospects when buying professional services. The professional services are limited to HR services in this thesis.

How to increase interaction is examined through two aspects: 1) what is the customer journey of the prospects like, and 2) how inbound marketing can support prospects to

move through the stages in their customer journeys. The thesis concentrates on the pre-purchase stages of the customer journey since inbound marketing is mainly about lead generation.

This thesis brings the new forms of marketing to the professional services world, which has been considered as more traditional and conservative. By defining customer journeys, a company can provide a better customer experience and targeting of marketing actions, resulting in an increase in interaction. It is important for companies to know their prospects to attract them in the right channels with the right content that prospects deem valuable for them. When the content of the supplier company is deemed valuable, the prospects are more likely to be susceptible to the supplier company's marketing messages. To make the content valuable, inbound marketing addresses customers' pain points and goals, and approaches them in the channels they prefer. Furthermore, inbound marketing is concentrated on the whole life cycle of the customer and on value-creation.

1.2 Research gap

In previous research, it has been acknowledged that in value creation, interaction is in a crucial role, but how to accomplish this in practice is lacking (Salomonson, Åberg, & Allwood, 2012), especially when it comes to the pre-purchase stages in B2B (business to business) professional service context. However, some research regarding interaction exists and in the B2B sector the interaction is researched through the topics of i.e., brand communities (Bruhn, Schnebelen & Schäfer, 2014), customer experience management (Zolkiewski, Story, Burton, Chan, Gomes, Hunter-Jones & Robinson, 2017), and salespeople's social media presence (Agnihotri, Dingus, Hu & Krush, 2016).

The customer journeys of B2B customers are not much researched in academic papers. However, the existing research regarding the topic examines how to map out and manage the touch points in customer journeys, and how to measure the customer experience of existing customers (Lee, Lanting & Rojdamrongratana, 2017; Andersson, Boedeker & Vuori, 2017) but it is not investigated how to map out prospects' customer journeys. Regarding inbound marketing, the research mainly

discusses inbound marketing, what it is (Opreana & Vinerean, 2015), and how it should be used alongside traditional marketing (Todor, 2016) or in emerging B2B context (Vieira, de Almeida, Agnihotri & Arunachalam, 2019). It is not examined how inbound marketing could support the customer journey of B2B prospects and what are the tactics for it, especially in the context of professional services. To gain information on this research gap, the following research questions were formed that are answered with this research:

RQ: How to increase interaction with B2B customers when buying professional services?

RQ1: What is the pre-purchase customer journey of prospects like?

RQ2: How can inbound marketing help prospects to move through their pre-purchase customer journey stages?

1.3 Research methodology

To answer the research question, the thesis utilises qualitative research methods and an abductive research strategy. Qualitative research methods allow the investigation of participants' perspectives to clarify the subjective meaning of the analysed problem. (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002). Qualitative research is interpretive and ethnographic in nature (Ochieng, 2009), making the thesis interpretive correspondingly. The abductive research strategy supports the interpretive nature of the thesis and it starts with theoretical pre-understanding that is extended in a practical sense with the results of this research.

The qualitative research method comprises semi-structured interviews that are used to collect primary data. Even though the initial criteria for selecting research participants came from the commissioner company, the criteria fit the purpose of the research since it covers well the B2B sector, which is studied in this thesis. The criteria for selecting research participants are architecture, engineering, and IT companies that have operations in Oulu area. IT companies are divided into two categories – consultant and software development companies – since these types of companies are different in the way they operate. Furthermore, CEOs of these companies are selected to be

interviewed since it is assumed that they are a crucial part of making the buying decision of professional HR services in the company.

A semi-structured interview is used as the qualitative research method in the thesis. It allows the researcher to follow the flow of the conversation and pose questions about emerging themes in the interview. To allow this conversation-like interview, an interview guide is created, using the customer journey model of Deasi (2016) as a basis. For every pre-purchase stage in the model from *engagement* to *purchase*, questions are created to gain knowledge on each participant's perceptions of those stages. The interviews are conducted as phone interviews and are recorded to help with the analysis process.

After analysing the data collected with semi-structured interviews, the customer journeys of each research participant are drawn and explained. Based on some similarities between the customer journeys, more general customer profiles are created and inbound marketing suggestions for those customer profiles are thereafter made.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

This thesis proceeds as follows. After the introduction, the thesis continues on to theoretical background that consists of chapters 2., 3., and 4. Chapter 2. introduces professional services and service firms, and how these services can create value for both the supplier and the customer. Chapter 3. defines the concept of the customer journey, what it is and how it can be mapped to provide better customer experience and management. In chapter 4., the topic of inbound marketing is discussed from various aspects, i.e., inbound marketing elements, tactics, and measurement, to give a comprehensive understanding of it. Thereafter, the research methods of the thesis are presented in chapter 5. Research methods comprise methodology, data collection, and data analysis. Furthermore, chapter 6. presents the analysis and results of the research, in which the customer journey models of prospects are drawn, and inbound marketing methods are suggested. The following chapter 7., presents the main findings of the whole thesis, and the final chapter 8., discusses the limitations and contributions of the thesis and offers suggestions for further research.

2 PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

The importance of services has grown immensely in today's society during the past few decades. The growth is partially due to manufacturing companies adding more and more services into their products, enabling the growth of firms that offer services. Furthermore, a change has been seen in the way how companies operate, since an increasing number of companies outsource part of their processes and concentrate only on their core competencies. Many companies decide it is better to outsource because they are forced to possess a vast amount of knowledge from different fields due to more complex organisational structures, fast-developing technologies, and an increasing internationalisation, which can be rather difficult. By using professional services, it enables companies to acquire and sustain the field-specific and narrow knowledge. (Hirvonen & Helander, 2001.)

Firms that offer these services are called professional service firms (PSF). They base their services on the employee's professional assessments and therefore rely heavily on the highly educated person's capability to attract, develop, and transfer knowledge to create value for their customers, and the services are customised to each client. The relationship between the company and the client representatives involves a lot of interaction, starting all the way from diagnosis of the problem to the delivery of the service. PSFs operate within relatively constrained contexts. There are two contextual components that both enable and constrain the service delivery – domain or strategy choice, and resources. (Løwendahl, Revang & Fosstenløkken, 2001.)

The domain choice includes the questions of what is delivered, to whom, and how. Furthermore, it includes the choice of industrial context – what is the professional context PSF operates in, for instance, a law firm might operate in the law industry and accounting firms in the accounting industry. However, there are even further choices in these professional contexts – law firms can provide services or specialise in i.e., contract law, tax law, labour law, or criminal law. The choice of domain is also affected by what the company can do, what its members would like to do, and what the potential clients want the company to deliver. Company resources can be divided into two categories: tangibles i.e., buildings, finances, and production machinery, and intangibles, i.e., management skills, professional expertise, client loyalty, corporate

culture, and reputation. However, the key strategic resource of companies is knowledge, which is enhanced through the daily operations of the company. This means that experts learn when they engage in projects and simultaneously learn from their clients. The projects, therefore, determine what the experts will learn and how much they will learn. (Løwendahl, Revang & Fosstenløkken, 2001.)

However, not all companies comprehend or even realise what professional services they might need due to not understanding the nature of such services. In most cases, there should be certain expertise in the organisation to realise the need for professional services. Furthermore, companies might have poor capabilities to utilise these services or have negative attitudes that might prohibit the professional services' effective use. To overcome these issues, supplier companies need to better recognise the problems and needs of customers. (Hirvonen & Helander, 2001.) Furthermore, customers assess professional services based on different aspects, i.e., value, which affects satisfaction and customer's intention to buy (Lapierre, Filiatrault & Chebat, 1999). Therefore, PSF must focus on value creation for customers.

2.1 Value creation in professional service firms

The value creation of PSFs is knowledge intensive and delivered through the highly educated employees of the company. When successful PSFs create value, they provide it for both the client, other firm members, and the owner. Owners gain both knowledge development as financial returns, increasing the value of the firm. However, there are three components to value creation in PSFs: the domain choice i.e., strategies of selecting clients and projects, the main resources, emphasis being on knowledge, and the value creation processes (VCPs). (Løwendahl, Revang & Fosstenløkken, 2001.) VCPs are explained next since the first two components – domain choice and strategies – that affect value creation in the PSFs were already described in the previous chapter.

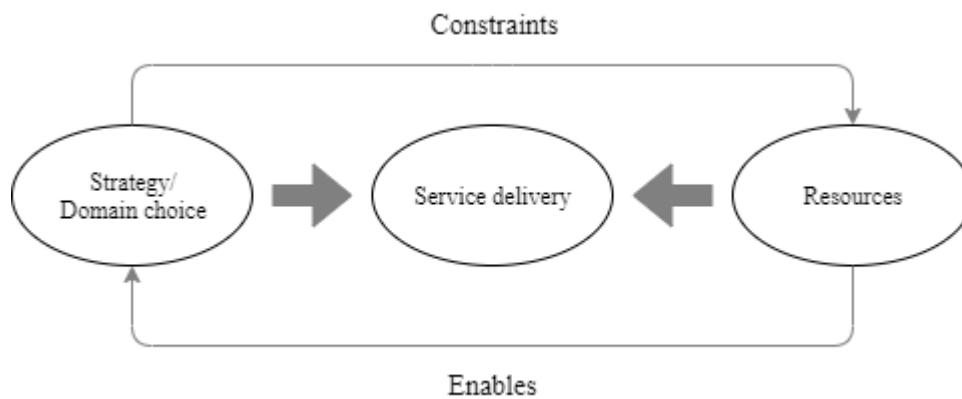


Figure 1. VCPs of PSF (adapted from Løwendahl, Revang & Fosstenløkken, 2001).

Figure 1. above demonstrates the VCPs of PSFs. It consists of two components: choice of domain and resources, that both restrain and enable the VCPs for each different project of PSFs. The third component of the process is service delivery and when service is delivered, as a byproduct, value is created in the form of domain enhancement and learning. Furthermore, value can be created by making investments in developing knowledge. For PSFs, knowledge development is critical since each service is tailored for each customer and clients buy services that include different types of knowledge. Developing a knowledge base adds value directly, both through individual learning and firm-level knowledge, and it adds value for the customer indirectly through the service delivery. The knowledge base is the most central part of the VCPs of PSFs because it is difficult, costly, and takes time to change. (Løwendahl, Revang & Fosstenløkken, 2001.)

Hirvonen & Helander (2001) define how companies can create value through customers' own value creation processes. This implies that every customer has their own value creation processes, and if supplier companies can take these into consideration, they manage to create value both for the customer's business as to their own. This is achieved by reaching the goals and missions of the customer that the customer evaluates according to their own measurements. (Hirvonen & Helander, 2001.) If the supplier is capable of understanding customers' goals, vision, mission, and strategy, it can build long-lasting and good relationships with the customer (Storbacka, Sivula & Kaario, 1999). When the customers' problems are understood better, a more suitable and valuable solution for solving these can be provided. A better

solution than the competitive supplier companies can offer. There are three phases how the supplier can create value: 1) first identifying the value creation processes of customer and support them in a profitable way that benefits both parties, 2) understanding there are three types of exchanges in the relationship: emotions, knowledge, and action, and 3) benefiting, in which emphasis must be put on providing value for both parties of the relationship. However, if the supplier company supports the value creation processes of the customer that are not in line with the core competences of the supplier, it can eventually become too expensive. Therefore, supplier companies need to concentrate on the most valuable customer relationships. (Hirvonen & Helander, 2001.)

Value creation in knowledge intensive services can also be seen as a joint problem solving in which both the supplier and the customer combine resources in a collaborative interactive process to solve problems. Supplier resources are i.e., professional judgement, methods, tools, specialised knowledge, and diagnosis skills. Whereas customer resources are i.e., information about business, needs and goals. When the supplier and the customer put their resources into the collaborative process, the end goal is to create optimal value-in-use by having not to make too many sacrifices. The collaborative process starts with problem identification, following by solution and implementation, and finally resulting in value-in-use. (Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola, 2012.) The value created by professional services and PSFs is mainly studied when the relationship is already formed between the supplier company and the prospective client. Value creation for prospects before forming a relationship with them is not studied and it requires further investigation.

2.2 Main elements of professional services

This chapter comprises the core elements of professional services and PSFs. What is unique to professional services is that they rely heavily on the expert's knowledge who delivers the service. How the person can extract and modify knowledge to solve customers' problems. Furthermore, the relationship between the company and the customer involves a lot of interaction. (Løwendahl, Revang & Fosstenløkken, 2001.)

PSFs operate within constrained contexts and the two components that both enable and constrain the service delivery are domain or strategy choice, and resources. However, the key component of all PSFs is knowledge. (Løwendahl, Revang & Fosstenløyken, 2001.) With professional services, the value can be delivered through customers own value creation processes (Hirvonen & Helander, 2001) or as a joint problem solving, in which the company's and the customer's resources are combined in an interactive process to solve the problem (Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola, 2012).

The current service research focuses mainly on studying different phenomena when the relationships between the supplier company and customers have already been formed but not when the relationship is not yet established. For instance, how supplier companies can provide value for their current customers. However, research regarding how to deliver value for the prospects in the pre-purchase phases is lacking and it needs more attention. This thesis tries to fill this gap by studying how to increase interaction between the prospects and the supplier company before the purchase-phase. Furthermore, it is important to bring the new views in marketing to the professional services context because it has been considered to be more traditional. Supplier companies must showcase customers through marketing actions before forming the relationship that they are capable of solving the customers' problems and they have the knowledge base to do so. It is assumed that when supplier companies accomplish to do so, they can already provide value for customers indirectly.

3 CUSTOMER JOURNEY

Customers travel through a journey when doing business in the B2B setting (Andersson, Boedeker & Vuori, 2017) and while the customer interacts with the company on this journey, touch points occur. These touch points can be both direct and indirect, i.e., direct with a company representative or indirect when other's reviews of the company are read. (Bakhtieva, 2017.) In each of these touch points, the customer has an affective experience with the company (Andersson et al., 2017). Therefore, to have a superior customer experience is a necessity, and the company who wins the customer experience competition will gain the biggest market share in the most profitable and sustainable way (Zafer, 2015, p. 83). Thus, managing customer journeys has become crucial for companies (Andersson et al., 2017). However, customer journeys are becoming more and more complex since customers are interacting with companies through multiple touch points in different channels and media (Lemon & Vorheof, 2016). The challenge for digital marketers lies in how to build an effective digital strategy that transforms all the contact points of a customer into touch points (Bakhtieva, 2017).

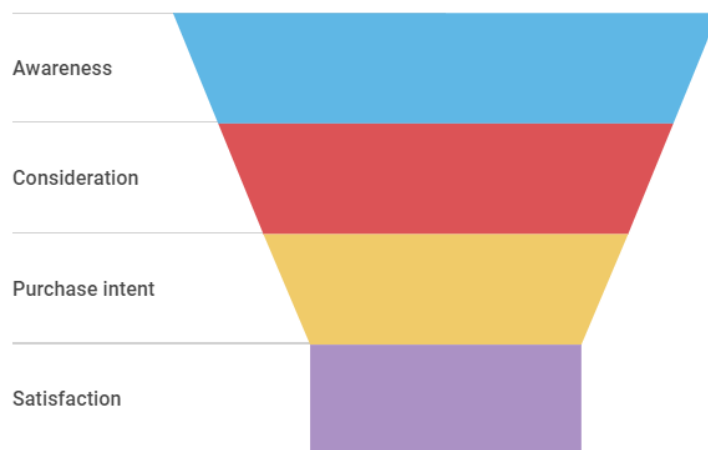


Figure 2. Traditional Customer Journey and Marketing Funnel (adapted from Colicev, Kumar & O'Connor, 2019).

The classic customer journey, or a marketing funnel, is demonstrated in figure 2. above. The traditional marketing funnel consists of the following stages: *awareness*, *consideration*, *purchase intent* and *satisfaction* (Colicev, Kumar & O'Connor, 2019). It is a linear process, in which customers move from start to finish. The funnel shape

comes from the assumption that in each of these stages, some customers drop out from the customer journey since they find the service or product not appropriate for them. (Peet, 2016.) Thus, a large number of customers never complete the customer journey. The goal for companies is to turn prospects into buyers by guiding them step by step from *awareness* to *purchase intent*. (Sapian & Vyshnevskaya, 2019.)

However, the traditional customer journey model does not represent well the customer journeys of today. The model puts all the emphasis on the purchase and thus, guides marketers to focus only on that aspect. The customer journeys are much more than just trying to make the customer come to the purchase decision. Furthermore, the model suggests that the customer's loyalty is only earned after the purchase has been made but in reality, the businesses must earn the loyalty and trust of customers in each interaction. The rise of online platforms has allowed customers to research products online, thus enlarging their consideration to different brands. This implies that the stage after *awareness*, *consideration*, is not narrowing customers that much as the figure demonstrates. Furthermore, the customer journey does not end after the purchase. If customers buy again, they come back to the customer journey without marketers having to rebuild the customer journey starting all the way from the beginning with them. (Noble, Cooperstein & Kemp, 2010.)

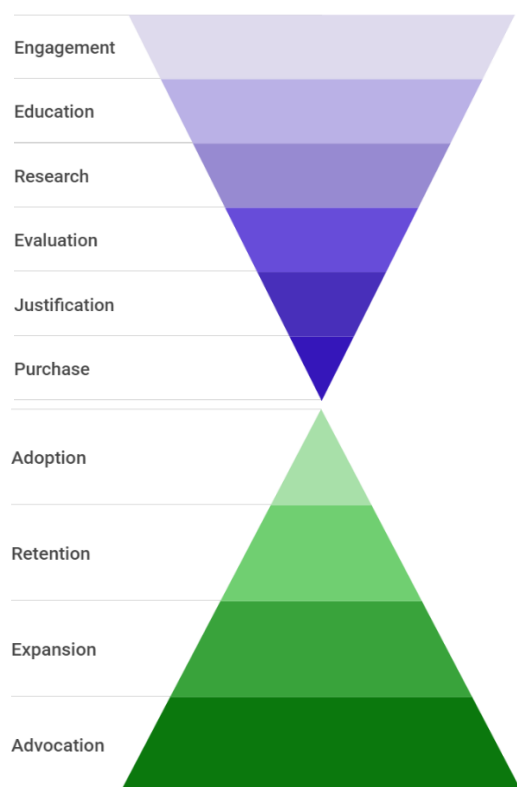


Figure 3. Customer journey model (adapted from Deasi, 2016).

Figure 3. demonstrates the extended customer journey, what happens from the very first encounter the customer has with the company to what occurs after the purchase has been made. The hourglass shape puts emphasis on engaging with the customer in the beginning and growing the customer relationship after the purchase. The 10-step customer journey model tries to encapsulate the whole customer life cycle. However, even if the customer journey is presented in a linear model, customers do not always flow through the stages one by one. They can enter at any stage of the model and even skip some of the stages. Furthermore, the customer journeys of different customers can change tremendously. (Deasi, 2016.)

The pre-purchase stages of the customer journey are *engagement*, *education*, *research*, *evaluation*, *justification*, and *purchase*. In figure 3., the pre-purchase stages are coloured in different shades of purple. The objective for companies on *engagement* level is to find the right audience. To be where the customers are and provide them with something of value so that the customers find the company message interesting and will pay attention to it. On *education* stage, the aim is to help customers identify their problems by creating content that aids customers to come to that realisation.

Therefore, the content must focus on customers' challenges and pain points. On *research* stage customers search for different solutions and try to find information about those offerings. It is important at this stage to highlight the key benefits and differentiators of the service or products to customers. On *evaluation* stage the customer assesses whether the service or product will meet their requirements and solve their problems. It is important to know what requirements are important to customers and how the evaluation is done. On *justification* stage, the justifications for the buying of the service or product are made. Customers might consider why to choose the exact alternative and how to justify it to other members of the organisation. On *purchase* stage, customers make the buying decision, but some new objections, concerns, or questions may arise. (Deasi, 2016.)

The expectations of customers of the company and the experienced value are all part of the customer journey (Andersson et al., 2017). Customers' perceptions should be analysed in each touch point in the customer journey to help discover weaknesses and strengths of current processes, which can lead to improvement in the quality of services and products (Ludwig, Wang, Kotthaus, Harhues & Pipek, 2017). Moreover, by analysing the path of B2B customers, companies can better design their activities, consequently enhancing value creation and positive customer experience (Andersson et al., 2017).

3.1 Defining customer journey

There are five different steps in defining a customer journey. The first step is gathering internal insight from customers, starting first from the existing ones. The second step is developing initial hypotheses. This means that the company should involve different stakeholders in defining who the customers are and what is important for them, since different people in the company have differing opinions about the customers. The third step is researching customer needs, perceptions, and processes to gain customer insight, which is traditionally done from the company's perspective. However, to comprehend customer needs, perceptions, and processes, the research methods need to be broadened to obtain real insight from the perspectives of customers. The fourth step in defining the customer journey is to analyse the customer insights. Analysis entails the investigation of gathered internal and external research data to be able to do

the journey mapping. During analysis, it is investigated what is the nature of customer interaction with the company, what is wanted from the interaction, and how the customer feels about the interactions. The fifth and final step in the process is mapping the customer journey. The analysis from the previous fourth step needs to be put into a visual representation. The visual map includes customer needs, perceptions, and processes. (Temkin, 2010.)

There are few pitfalls in creating customer journey maps and implementing them. The first pitfall is to treat each touch point as a separate experience, not giving attention to the omnichannel experience of the customer. There might be errors in data collection and analysis, and it must be understood that the customer map is rapid to change. However, customer journey mapping is important to understand the consumer behaviour in the omnichannel environment and it enables companies to estimate their performance based on the outcome of the customer journey and the total customer experience. (Berman, 2020.)

3.2 Customer journey maps

A customer journey map is a visual representation of a customer's journey with the company (Tincher, 2013). With the customer journey map, the company can identify the most important customer touch points in different target markets and measure the value of every touch point (Berman, 2020). Companies often operate with an internal focus, but the customer journey mapping helps to change the focus from internal to external (Temkin, 2010). The customer journey map represents the customer's point of view and demonstrates what the customer is trying to achieve at every stage of the process (Tincher, 2013). Furthermore, mapping the customer journey helps companies to understand the needs of the customer and their motivation in making a buying decision (Bakhtieva, 2017).

Customer journey maps are used most often for two reasons: 1) to understand touch points, and 2) to understand emotional impact. When companies know what the customer's touch points are and understand them, it helps to uncover what interferes and what assists the buying process of customers. However, companies do not have control of each touch point, since some of them are social media, and friends and

family of the customer, but the company needs to understand their impact on the journey. The second reason, to understand the emotional impact, helps to reveal the emotional impact of the touch points for customers. How the interaction in every touch point creates or destroys value for the customer. (Tincher, 2013.)

Mapping the customer journey is important for companies, since losing even just a single customer can be crucial. Mapping requires qualitative research, most often interviews or ethnographies, but when the journeys are understood, the company can better align its business activities to create better experiences for the customer. (Tincher, 2013.)

3.3 Customer experience

Customer experience is an integral part of the customer journey, and just as in customer journeys, it also involves various touch points and in each of these touch points the customer has an experience. (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016.) Touch points do not include only digital contacts i.e., advertising and media, but also personal and physical ones, i.e., contact centers, events, and salespeople (Zafer, 2015, p. 15). Furthermore, customer experience has become more social in nature and this requires companies to integrate various business functions to create positive customer experiences (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

The formation and management of customer experience can be seen from different perspectives: from the company's stand, in which the company designs the customer experience for the customer; but also, from the customer's stand, in which, the customer is the co-creator of customer experience. (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016.) The feedback from other customers and the customer's value proposition affects the customer's expectation of the company, and that expectation filters the customer experience (Zafer, 2015, p. 15).

Customer experience is a dynamic and iterative process that involves all the customer journey stages from pre-purchase all the way to post-purchase. In every step of the purchase cycle, customer experiences various touch points, from which only a few are under the company's control. (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016.) Customer experience can be

measured by customer satisfaction rate and customer retention rate, which helps to group customers into different groups based on their loyalty. The higher the customer experience, the higher the trust and loyalty. As the trust grows between the customer and the company, the customer is less likely to move their business elsewhere even if another service provider would provide a slightly better solution. In contradiction, low customer experience promotes value defections and puts relationships with customers at risk. (Zafer, 2015, pp. 77-79.) However, it is important to understand what constitutes customer experience and how the experience is co-created with customers. To strengthen or to create better experiences for customers to achieve long-lasting relationships. (Zolkiewski et al., 2017.)

3.4 Customer journeys in B2B professional services context

Much of the academic research regarding customer journeys concentrate on B2C customers and not on B2B customers, but in previous research it has been acknowledged that the customer journeys and buying behaviours between these two are very different in nature. The main differences were that B2B buyers make the purchase based on well-defined criteria, the buying process takes longer, impulsive buying decisions are rarely made, a lot of people are involved in it, and the stakeholders (external or internal) influence the buying decision (Grewal, Lilien, Bharadwaj, Jindal, Kayande, Lusch & Sridhar, 2015). However, there are some similarities in the decision-making processes (Lingqvist, Plotkin & Stanley, 2015) and these are discussed further next.

As B2C customers, B2B customers also travel through a journey (Andersson, Boedeker & Vuori, 2017), and on these journeys touch points occur (Bakhtieva, 2017). In each touch point, the customer has an experience with the company (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The touch points can be either physical, digital, or personal (Zafer, 2015, p. 15). Not only has the digital environment shaped the customer journeys of B2C customers, but also B2B customers. The B2B journeys have become less linear and shaped into more circular patterns of different touch points and an increasing number of B2B customers will complete their purchases on digital platforms. B2B customers share their experiences, research, evaluate and select products and services like B2C customers do. B2B customers are also influenced by the same social network

sites that affect individual customers. (Lingqvist, Plotkin & Stanley, 2015.) Ultimately, the buying decisions in the organisations are made by individuals. Therefore, the B2B decision-making process involves both individual and organisational aspects. (Diba et al., 2019.)

When it comes to the customer journeys of B2B prospects when buying professional services, it is assumed that the prospects pay extra attention to the interactions in the touch points. Since prospects are buying professional expertise and mainly knowledge, the touch points must be well designed to create an expert image of the supplier company for the customers. Therefore, companies who sell professional services should pay extra attention to defining their customers' journeys and evaluate the touch points to offer the best possible customer experience. It is assumed that when companies do so, it will increase the interaction between the supplier and the customer, and customers are more likely to buy the service. Just as other B2B customers, it is expected that companies buying professional services also utilise digital channels for searching and evaluating the services. However, since the interaction is in a substantial role in the professional services context, it is assumed that the customer journeys cannot only be digital and require some personal contact.

4 INBOUND MARKETING

Due to digitalisation and the development of the Internet, customers' behaviour has changed drastically and they have become more "immune" to traditional marketing messages. Approximately 86% of people skip ads on television, and 44% of direct mail received is never opened. Moreover, due to irrelevant or intrusive advertising, 84% of 25-to-34-year-olds have bounced off from their favourite website. (Bigshot Inbound, 2016.) The previously mentioned changes in the customer behaviour mainly address B2C customers but they can also be applied to B2B customers to some extent. In previous research, B2B buying and B2C buying were seen completely differently. However, this view on B2B buying behaviour is changing (Lingqvist, Plotkin & Stanley, 2015).

Traditional marketing is not the most applicable marketing option for companies anymore because it focuses too much on interrupting customers and pushing the company message out (Vinerean & Opreana, 2015). Since customers have become more adept at tuning out the pushy marketing messages, a new form of digital marketing has emerged: inbound marketing (Vinerean & Opreana, 2015). With inbound marketing, the company forms a close relationship with its prospects or customers who have voluntarily expressed interest in the company's services or products. The relationship formation is done by attracting and involving customers by quality content marketing, and it is about creating a relationship of loyalty and trust with customers. (Patruti-Baltes, 2016.) Furthermore, after establishing the relationship, the nature of inbound marketing – interactivity and engagement – allows fostering the relationship, which is not possible with traditional marketing. It is the development of technology that has allowed the relationship marketing tactics to form, i.e., stories that fulfil emotional or usefulness criteria, or still images and GIFs. (Vinerean & Opreana, 2015.)

In inbound marketing, the whole customer life cycle is considered, from customers being first prospects to advocates in the end (Patruti-Baltes, 2016). The potential, existing, or aspirational customers decide to interact with a specific company because the company's inbound marketing provides them with something useful, something

the customer sees of value. The main goal of inbound marketing is to attract leads (potential customers) and convert them into customers. (Vinerean & Opreana, 2015.)

4.1 Traditional vs inbound marketing

There are many differences between traditional and inbound marketing and these are discussed next. The differences between these two marketing views are demonstrated in table 1. below.

Table 1. Differences between traditional and digital inbound marketing (adapted from Vinerean & Opreana, 2015).

	Traditional marketing	Digital inbound marketing
<i>Basis</i>	Interruption	Organic
<i>Aim</i>	Finding customers	Getting found by potential, existing, and aspirational customers
<i>Focus</i>	Increased sales	Creating long lasting relationships by reaching and converting qualified customers
<i>Target</i>	Large audiences	Interested prospects
<i>Tactics</i>	Print Advertisements TV advertisement Outdoors Cold calling Trade shows Email lists	Blogs, eBooks, White papers Videos on YouTube, Vimeo etc. Search engine optimisation tactics Infographics Webinars Feeds, RSS Social media marketing tactics

With traditional marketing or outbound marketing, marketers push services and products onto ideal customers. The aim of traditional marketing is finding customers, whereas with inbound marketing the goal is to be found by customers. The focus of traditional marketing is to increase sales and the target is large audiences, and in contrast, inbound marketing is aimed at interested prospects and the focus is on creating relationships by converting leads into customers. Tactics of traditional marketing include i.e., print, TV advertisement, cold calling, and email lists. In contradiction, tactics of inbound marketing comprise, i.e., search engine optimisation

(SEO), webinars, blogs, eBooks, and social media marketing. (Vinerean & Opreana, 2015.)

In opposition to traditional marketing in which products and services are advertised to ideal customers directly, in inbound marketing they are highlighted indirectly in a context in which the ideal customer realises they are the target audience of the company. Traditional marketing is therefore invasive and inbound marketing permissive, since customers agree to be identified and targeted, and the communication aimed at them does not bother them. The efficiency of inbound marketing is superior to the efficiency of outbound marketing and inbound marketing is more cost-efficient. (Patruti-Baltes, 2016.)

Inbound marketing is more complex and difficult in nature than traditional marketing and it requires segmented communication since it cannot be done “universally” as traditional marketing can be done. Moreover, the people who do not use the Internet, cannot become customers with inbound marketing. (Patruti-Baltes, 2016.) However, inbound marketing is more preferred by customers and it brings superior benefits for the company than traditional marketing (Soegoto & Simbolon, 2018).

4.2 Elements of inbound marketing

The elements of inbound marketing are *content creation and distribution*, *life cycle marketing*, *personalisation*, *multi-channel*, and *integration*, which are presented in table 2. below. When it comes to *content creation and distribution*, the customer is acknowledged when creating the content, thereafter, the content is distributed as wide as possible. Inbound marketing takes into consideration the whole customer life cycle, making inbound marketing *life cycle marketing*. It is acknowledged that customers start off first by strangers, changing into visitors, then into contacts, and finally into customers. Furthermore, customers can turn into advocates of the company in the final phase of the customer life cycle.

Inbound marketing allows the *personalisation* of marketing tactics since the customer is in the centre of the inbound marketing. Customer’s needs and wants are known and this knowledge is utilised in communication and content creation. Inbound marketing

is *multi-channel marketing* in nature, which means that customers are approached where they are, and in the channel where they want to interact with the supplier company. Lastly, inbound marketing is about *integration*. It is important to integrate the content creation, publishing, and analytical tools to be able to publish the right content at the right time. (Patruti-Baltes, 2016.)

Table 2. Elements of inbound marketing (adapted from Patruti-Baltes, 2016).

Elements of inbound marketing	
Element	Definition
<i>Content creation and distribution</i>	Targeted content that meets customers' questions and needs, then sharing the content wide.
<i>Lifecycle marketing</i>	Customers start off first as strangers, changing into visitors, then into contacts, and finally into customers. Specific marketing tactics help to transform strangers into promoters.
<i>Personalisation</i>	By learning more about leads it allows better personalisation of content to meet customers' specific needs.
<i>Multi-channel</i>	Inbound marketing is multi-channel in nature since it approaches people where they are and in the channel they choose to interact with you.
<i>Integration</i>	Being able to publish right content at the right time requires integration of content creation and publishing and analytical tools.

4.3 Customer life cycle

A customer's life cycle is a path of the customer (Farruh, 2019) and it starts when a customer becomes first aware of the company and after that changes into a customer. The relationship is ended when the issues between the customer and the company are solved. (Gong, 2012.)

The customer life cycle consists of five different stages: *reach*, *acquisition*, *conversion*, *retention*, and *loyalty*. At *reach* stage the company attracts customer's attention and at *acquisition* stage the customer is brought under the influence of the

company. At *conversion* stage the customer is turned into a customer and afterwards the customer is retained at *retention* stage. At the last stage of the customer life cycle, *loyalty*, the customer is turned into an advocate of the company. (Farruh, 2019.)

Gong (2012) in contradiction, identified four different stages to customer life cycle: *birth*, *growth*, *maturity*, and *decline* or *death* phase. The life cycle perspective is important in marketing since it observes customer actions and pairs them with suitable marketing activities. If different kinds of actions and communications are utilised in each of the customer life cycle stages, it guarantees that the company maximises customer lifetime value and increases overall cash flow. (Lee, Lanting & Rojdamrongratana, 2017.)

In the last stages of the customer life cycle, the link between relationship quality and value co-creation is high and weaker in the early stages. The stages in the middle (*growth* and *maturity*) are quite solid and the customer wants to progress in the relationship with the company during these stages. The customer wants to co-create because when the company implements the customer's suggestions to its services or products, it benefits the customer. Customer value co-creation is likely to develop when the customer has trust in the relationship and in the company, is satisfied with its services or products, and feels an emotional bond with the company. This results in the customer being able to interact with the company by i.e., making suggestions, participating in service/product development, or co-creating communication and marketing strategies. If resources want to be invested efficiently, the company must have segmented strategies and adapt marketing activities to each customer's specific situation to achieve the highest level of value co-creation. (Cambra-Fierro, Melero-Polo & Sese, 2018.)

4.4 Service-dominant logic and value creation

With inbound marketing, a company creates value for its customers by for instance creating content that customers deem valuable for them (Vinerean & Opreana, 2015). The idea of value creation in inbound marketing supports the idea of service-dominant logic (SD logic). In SD logic, the customer is the co-creator of value and the nature of value depends on the context in which the service or product is used. Furthermore,

customers' perceptions of the value affect how the value is seen. (Payne, Storbacka & Frow, 2007.)

Three different processes in SD logic can be distinguished: 1) customer value-creating processes, 2) supplier value-creating processes, and 3) encounter processes. In customer value-creating processes the value is created by customer's experiences over time and the focus of marketing is on the co-creation of relationship experiences. In supplier value-creating processes the supplier is assisting the customer's value creation by facilitating organisational learning and delivery of relevant relationship experiences. Lastly, encounter processes comprise two-way transactions or interactions between the customer and the supplier, the interactions being i.e., direct mail, phone calls and orders. (Payne et al., 2007.) Customer value-creating processes can support inbound marketing, since the customer in both is considered to be in the centre: value is created by customers through experiences and the importance is in forming relationships that provide meaningful experiences for the customer.

When SD logic is applied to inbound marketing, it offers four leverage points for fostering inbound marketing: 1) co-production and co-creation of value, 2) engaging customers in dialogs, 3) realising that value is unique for each customer, and 4) embracing learning. With co-production and co-creation customers are a part of inbound marketing, and with their competences they help the company to create a part of the core offering. By applying SD logic to inbound marketing, the communication should be characterised by dialog and conversation, which means that all parties are truthful and transparent with each other. SD logic sees value unique to each customer because all customers are co-creators of value. However, to determine the value, it depends on the context of the usage. Listening to customers and learning about them is the key performance of companies according to SD logic and marketers must understand if something went wrong, why. (Lusch & Vargo, 2011.)

4.5 Inbound marketing tactics

According to Dakouan, Benabdelouahed & Anabir (2019), the core tactics of inbound marketing comprises *content marketing*, *social media marketing*, and *search engine*

optimisation (SEO). Vinerean & Opreana (2015) also add *brand-focused marketing communication* to be one of the core tactics of inbound marketing.

Content marketing has become an effective marketing strategy due to the rise of technology. With good content, visitors are attracted to the company's website, their interest retained, making them re-visit, turning them into customers and later into advocates. (Dakouan et al., 2019.) Therefore, the content strategy is the cornerstone and main strategy of inbound marketing. With relevant content, the company creates value for its customers and reinforces customer behaviour in the desired direction. (Vinerean & Opreana, 2015.) Furthermore, by publishing entertaining, educative, and informative content, it helps to earn target audiences' trust and loyalty. When the trust is already earned, it is easier to convert leads into customers. By producing content frequently, it shows the customers that the company is committed to solving their problems and concerns. Furthermore, B2B buyers consume around three to five relevant content addressing their issues before contacting the company. (Brenner, 2019.) The main content is either text, video, or image but the content varies from i.e., Ebooks, interactive content, blogs, to infographics (Vinerean & Opreana, 2015).

Social media marketing has formed due to the growing use of social network sites (Dakouan et al., 2019) i.e., Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, and LinkedIn (Patruti-Baltes, 2016). An average person has around 7.6 social media accounts and spends around two hours on social media every day (Brenner, 2019). For most companies, the most important social media channel is LinkedIn. LinkedIn is used for sharing professional content, learning, and forming relationships with other people from different companies and industries. Furthermore, social media gives B2B customers an immediate access to knowledge allowing them to make more informed choices. This has changed how B2B customers make buying decisions since fewer companies are relying on more traditional sources, i.e., catalogues, trade shows, and intermediaries. (Diba et al., 2019.)

Social media has revolutionised marketing and more specifically commercial practices like paid media. The challenge for marketers is to spread complex information without overwhelming customers. Social media is not just another channel to push out marketing messages, it is about engaging with B2B customers and enforcing the

“people” behind the company to stand out from the constant spam and irrelevant marketing customers are facing constantly. (Brenner, 2019.) The content on social media is always available for customers and it can be spread far and wide. Companies should create content that is valuable and essential for the customer but also in line with the company’s brand communication. Furthermore, companies can benefit from word-of-mouth (WOM) on social networks and must be attentive to what customers are saying about the company online. (Dakouan et al., 2019.) Moreover, social media marketing allows easier co-creation and collaboration of products and marketing campaigns. When companies reach engaged customers on social networks, they increase their revenue. (Vinerean & Opreana, 2015.) To summarise, social media has the capacity to influence B2B marketing tremendously and its role just keeps on growing (Diba et al., 2019).

SEO is based on the logic that the company’s website earns a higher ranking in search engines when the website is deemed to be a quality website. The more quality website, the more traffic the website receives. Algorithms crawl the website looking for internal and external links, content, and URL sources page by page to rank the website. A content strategy is useful for *SEO*’s point of view because it tells the algorithms better what the site is about, typically resulting in a better ranking on the search engines. (Dakouan et al., 2019.) Companies need to make sure that they can be found online when customers are searching for an answer to their questions. Typically, the buying process starts online and therefore companies need to choose keywords to match the customers’ queries, optimise pages, creating content, and building links to increase their visibility on search engines. Algorithms favour websites that create quality content consistently to their websites. (Vinerean & Opreana, 2015.)

With *brand-focused marketing communication*, the company creates an authentic and holistic brand in an online setting, and it has a big impact on the capitalisation of the company. Marketing communications is the way how the company communicates - directly and indirectly - to customers. Creating an authentic brand and keeping the marketing communication true to the brand in all marketing channels helps to differentiate the company from others and increases credibility in the eyes of the customers. By repositioning the brand to meet customers’ needs better, the company

gains superior positioning. Authentic and relevant brands gain more positive WOM and create better digital experiences for customers. (Opreana & Vinerean, 2015.)

Furthermore, *Google AdWords* (paid advertising on Google search engine) can be added as one of the tactics of inbound marketing even though it is an advertising platform. The reason is that Google AdWords is not invasive for customers since they are searching for something they want information of - something that they need - and the company's ads can be targeted on those specific queries. Not interrupting the customers but providing them the information they are searching for. (Soegoto & Simbolon, 2018.)

4.6 Measuring inbound marketing success

Measuring online inbound marketing is necessary. When digital marketing and digital campaigns are monitored, it shows which tactics work and which need adjustments. Opreana and Vinerean (2015) introduce five different metrics to analyse the effectiveness of inbound marketing: *website activity*, *source of traffic*, *nature of website traffic*, *responses and outcomes*, and *integrated marketing metrics*.

Website activity comprises page views and the number of visitors: how many of them are new or old. *Source of traffic* measures from which sources the visitors come to the website, if they come from email marketing, social media, paid or organic search engines. With what keywords they find the website, from which countries do they come from, and which language do they use. The most important thing is to be able to divide how much of the visitors are direct (come directly to the website), referrals (come through links from other sites), organic (visitors who found the website organically from search engines with specific keywords) or social (visitors from social media). *Nature of website activity* analyses what the visitors do on the website: what the entry and exit pages are, average time spent on a page, bounce rate, and click-throughs. *Responses and outcomes* measure i.e., lead generation, brand awareness, return-on-investment (ROI), content downloads, subscriptions, orders, social media reach, and customer engagement. *Integrated marketing metrics* monitor inbound marketing metrics i.e., cost of customer acquisition (COCA), retention rate, customer

lifetime value (CLV), referrals, lead-to-conversion sales, Net Promoter Score (NPS), revenue growth, and profitability. (Opreana and Vinerean, 2015.)

Presumably, the main metric how to measure any digital marketing, also inbound marketing, is the return on investment (ROI). To measure ROI, it must be first understood what the goals of the company are and what is wanted from a digital or inbound marketing campaign. To understand ROI, the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and goals must be set for marketing. Some KPIs are related to general performance (traffic, reach, leads), channel-based (search engines, social networks, website, blog), source-based performance (PPC, referrals, organic search, direct traffic, email), or campaign-based performance (click through, lead generation, conversions). (Todor, 2016.)

4.7 Theoretical framework

This chapter comprises the theories applied in this thesis and explains how they are linked together. The main theories were professional services, customer journey, and inbound marketing. Furthermore, in this chapter, it is explained how these main theories are connected to interaction.

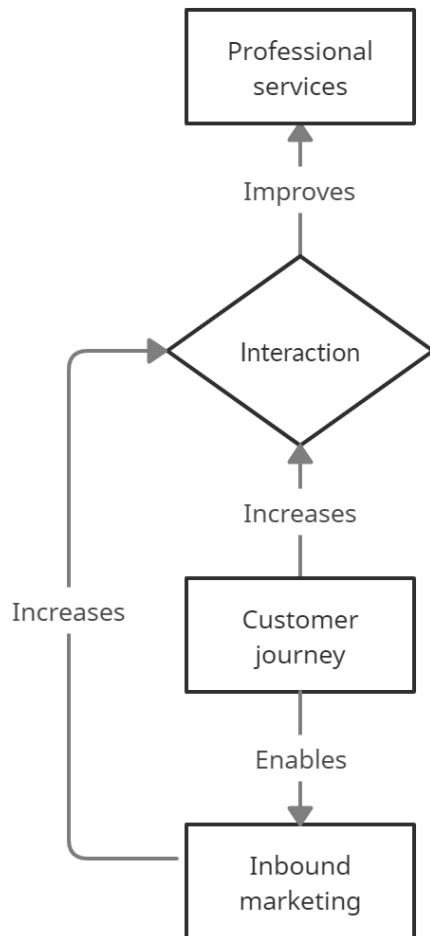


Figure 4. Theoretical framework.

The theoretical framework is demonstrated in figure 4. above. By defining customer journeys of B2B customers, it enables companies to better design their inbound marketing activities when it is known what the touch points in the customer journeys are and what is expected from the touch points by the customers. When the company knows i.e., what marketing channels customers prefer, what kind of content should be published and where, and utilises this knowledge in their marketing, it helps customers to move through the customer journey stages more effortlessly. Thus, by better designing marketing activities, it provides better results for the supplier company. It is assumed that when utilising both customer journey mapping and designing appropriate inbound marketing tactics, it will result in an increase in interaction between the prospects and the supplier company. When interaction is increased, it improves the quality of professional services and, thus, customers are more likely to buy the

services. This theoretical framework is utilised in analysing the data that is gathered with this research.

5 RESEARCH METHODS

The research methods chapter comprise methodology, data collection, and data analysis. The chosen research methodology and research strategy are explained and justified next. Furthermore, the process of collecting the primary data and how the data is analysed are also introduced in this chapter.

5.1 Methodology

The thesis aims to answer the following question:

RQ: How to increase interaction with B2B customers when buying professional services?

RQ1: What is the pre-purchase customer journey of prospects like?

RQ2: How can inbound marketing help prospects to move through their pre-purchase customer journey stages?

To answer the research question, the thesis utilises qualitative research method. When a qualitative research method is utilised, the nature of it aids in understanding the problem by producing in-depth information (Queirós, Faria, & Almeida, 2017). The qualitative research method does not utilise statistical research practices, but methods that allow to understand i.e., persons' behaviours, experiences, interpretations, and social contexts. It allows the research of the perspectives of participants to clarify the subjective meaning of the analysed problem. (Fossey et al., 2002.) Qualitative research is interpretive and ethnographic in nature (Ochieng, 2009), making the thesis interpretive correspondingly. With interpretive methodology, the concentration is on comprehending the meaning of human action and experiences (Fossey et al., 2002).

The research strategy of the thesis is abductive since it supports the interpretive nature and qualitative research methods of the research. Abductive research strategy brings two benefits: firstly, it realises that social reality is constructed by research participants' perceptions and secondly, it allows the researcher to immerse in the research to realise what is remarkable in the interpretivist reality and then insightfully

make hypotheses of likely causations or associations (Chamberlain, 2006). Furthermore, with the abductive research strategy, a construct or interpretation is developed, or a theory is established and tested. It realises that there are multiple social realities that are changing, not just one. (Ong, 2012.) Moreover, pre-existential knowledge of the research problem is required when using the abductive research strategy (Chamberlain, 2006).

5.2 Data collection

As the goal of the thesis is to examine how to increase interaction with B2B prospects by defining their pre-purchase customer journeys and thereafter establishing the suitable inbound marketing methods, the 10-step customer journey model (see figure 3.) by Deasi (2016) is used as a guide in data collection. Since the aim is to learn from research participants how they experience the research issue and to learn their meanings and interpretations of it, the research methods need to support the discovery and the complexity of participants' meanings and interpretations (Ochieng, 2009). To gain an understanding of the research participants' experiences and interpretations, semi-structured interviews are applied in data collection to gain primary data.

Interviews are one of the most common qualitative research methods. They can be structured or semi-structured in nature and conducted in groups or individually (Green, Duan, Gibbons, Hoagwood, Palinkas & Wisdom, 2014). Interviews give access to the research participants' views and experiences. Semi-structured interviews are implemented in the thesis since they allow a more targeted focus on a certain topic in a conversational manner. (Fossey et al., 2002.) In semi-structured interviews, there is an interview guide with a list of questions. Even though there is an interview guide, semi-structured interviews allow the interviewer to follow the flow of the conversation, asking questions as they occur and allowing research participants to raise topics of their own interest, which would not be possible with structured interviews. (Green et al., 2014.)

Purposeful sampling is utilised in selecting the interviewees. With purposeful sampling, the respondents are selected to maximise the richness and depth of the data concerning the research question (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The criteria for

purposeful sampling and selecting participants were initially introduced by the commissioner company. Even though the primary criteria for selecting research participants for this research came from the case company, the criteria fit the purpose of the research since it covers well the B2B sector, which is studied in this thesis. These selected B2B sectors are also likely to buy professional services, which also fit the purpose of this research.

The research participant criteria included industry, location, and company size (number of employees). Thus, companies from the architecture, engineering, and IT industries that have operations in the Oulu area and have between 20 to 200 employees, were selected to be interviewed. Furthermore, the IT industry was split into two – consultant and IT software development companies – since they are different in nature and in the way they operate. The CEOs of these companies were interviewed since it is assumed that they are a crucial part of making the buying decision of professional HR services. Furthermore, in smaller companies, CEOs are typically involved in HR work, doing HR work themselves or parts of it. Therefore, it is expected they have knowledge of HR-related matters.

The data of interviews and research participants were collected and are demonstrated in table 3. below. The data consists of the industry, the research participants' position in the company, when the interviews were held, and how long the interviews lasted. All the research participants were CEOs and the interviews were held in December 2020. The interviews typically lasted from 25 minutes to 50 minutes.

Table 3. Information of the interviews.

Company	Position	Date of the interview	Duration/minutes
Architecture company X	CEO	11.12.2020	35
Architecture company Y	CEO	18.12.2020	25
Engineering company X	CEO	01.12.2020	50
Engineering company Y	CEO	02.12.2020	40
IT consultant company X	CEO	15.12.2020	30
IT consultant company Y	CEO	11.12.2020	30

IT software development company X	CEO	31.12.2020	45
IT software development company Y	CEO	10.12.2020	40

5.2.1 Interview process and design

The thesis follows the 7 different stages of interviewing process. The stages are *thematizing*, *designing*, *interviewing*, *transcribing*, *analysing*, *verifying*, and finally *stage reporting* (Guion, Diehl & McDonald, 2001).

The first stage in the interviewing process is *thematizing*, in which the purpose of the interviews is clarified. Once it is done, the key information can be identified that is gathered through in-depth interviews. (Guion, Diehl & McDonald, 2001.) The first step in this research interview process was to clarify the purpose of the interview. The purpose was to obtain data on how to increase the interaction between the case company and their prospects. By clarifying the purpose first, it was made sure that the data from interviews correctly answer the research question.

The next stage in the interview process is *designing*. After defining what is wanted to know in the research process, the ways how to extract that knowledge from the interviews are designed. This is an interview guide that entails the key questions and topics. The guide helps the interviewer to maintain consistency and stay focused on the right topics. (Guion, Diehl & McDonald, 2001.) When designing interviews, one of the most crucial parts is creating effective research questions, questions that allow the interviewer to gain in-depth knowledge of the participants and to gain the maximum amount of data. (Turner, 2010.) Therefore, to create effective research questions they must be open-ended to allow participants to express with their own terms when answering. Questions must be neutral in tone to avoid biased answers. The neutrality is achieved when evocative or judgmental wordings in questions are avoided. Furthermore, questions are asked one at a time and worded clearly so that the participant understands the questions. Furthermore, asking “why” questions should be avoided or asked carefully. (McNamara, 2009.) Interview questions of this research were designed around the research question. Since it is researched how to increase the

interaction between the company and their prospects by using the right inbound marketing methods in each step of the customer journey, the customer journey model of Deasi (see figure 3.) was utilised in the designing of research questions. For each step of the model, corresponding research questions were composed to collect primary data. The interview guide (see appendix 1) consists of 13 questions that consist of key concepts and are neutral in tone and open-ended to avoid any biases.

The third stage is *interviewing*. Introductions and explanations of the purpose of the study should be made at the beginning of the interview to put the respondents at ease. Interviewer must listen and observe respondents as the interviewer guides the respondent through the conversation until all the topics are covered. (Guion, Diehl & McDonald, 2001.) The interviews typically last up to 30 minutes to one hour. Since the iterative nature of qualitative research allows the data collection and preliminary data analysis to coincide, it often results in altering the questions. Questions that are not effective at eliciting information can be discarded and new ones added, or existing ones altered. Furthermore, the interviewer must be ready to follow the flow of the conversation with the participant, since detouring from the interview questions can help in gaining a deeper understanding of the interviewee's knowledge and interests. (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006.) All research participants were informed about the research before interviewing. The information included the introduction of the interviewer, the purpose of the research, and how participants' responses are handled. The interview questions were sent to the respondents before the interview to give them time to study the questions to get more in-depth answers. The interviews were conducted as phone interviews and they were recorded to help with transcribing and analysing the interviews. The researcher led the interviews by asking the questions in the interview guide and also by asking additional questions about topics that emerged during the conversations. The interviews were conducted in Finnish and lasted typically between 25-50 minutes.

The fourth stage in the interview process is *transcribing*, which involves writing a text of all the interviews based on an audio recording. Each question and response are written out. Moreover, the side notes of the interviewer are included in the transcription by putting them in a separate category or column. (Guion, Diehl &

McDonald, 2001.) All interviews were written into a text in this research process by utilising audio recordings of the interviews.

The fifth stage is *analysing*, in which the transcripts are re-read to identify occurring themes and data analysis synthesising answers to the questions (Guion, Diehl & McDonald, 2001). After transcribing the interviews, they were analysed. Each pre-purchase customer journey stage of Deasi's model was made into its own category. Thereafter, occurring themes in the transcripts were coded according to the categories. The analysis process of the data collected with interviews is explained more in detail in chapter 5.3.

The sixth stage is *verifying*. Verifying includes examining the credibility of the data gathered. (Guion, Diehl & McDonald, 2001.) The validity and reliability of the research are examined to assess the credibility of the primary data gathered and the interpretation that is drawn from the data. These are discussed later in the thesis in chapter 8.2.

The final, and seventh stage, *reporting* involves sharing the results of the interviews in an oral or written form (Guion, Diehl & McDonald, 2001). Based on the analysis of the interviews, customer journeys were created for each participant. The customer journey models are presented in chapter 6. alongside suitable marketing methods for each customer profile that were created based on the similarities in the buying behaviour in the customer journeys.

5.3 Data analysis

Data analysis and data collection typically occur concurrently (Ryan, Coughlan & Cronin, 2009). However, the final analysis of data happens after the data has been gathered with the interview process (Turner, 2010). Miles and Huberman (1994) identify three themes in analysing the interview data: *data reduction* (the data is transcribed and focused), *data display* (the data is displayed typically in a graphic form to show similarities or relationships), and *verification* (explanations and conclusions made from the data). However, there are more stages to the analysis process.

The first stage in analysing interviews is to make notes after all the interviews and make memos or ideas on how to categorise the data. Afterward, the researcher immerses himself or herself in the data by reading through the transcripts of the interviews, making general themes simultaneously. The next step is to make the categorisation or headings and refining them by reducing the number of categories to make a final list. Later, the transcripts are read again alongside the categorisation list to ensure they cover all the aspects that emerged during the interviews. Thereafter, the transcripts are coded according to the list of categories. The coding might require reading through the transcripts several times and refining the codes. After all the analysis has been done, the next stage in the data analysis process is writing. Writing includes taking examples of data with a commentary that connects the examples, moving from one section to another writing up the whole interview project. The researcher can choose whether to write the findings alongside links to literature or to write a separate section for linking findings to the references. (Burnard, 1991.)

The interviews were written into a text using audio recordings of the interviews. The transcribing included the interview questions that were in the interview guide, additional questions that were asked to gain more knowledge of emerging topics, and participants' answers. Thereafter, data analysis was done utilising a program called NVivo. The next step in the data analysis process was to read through the interviews and to do a categorisation. The categorisation was done using Deasi's customer journey model (see figure 3.) and all the stages leading to purchase were made into their own categories. The categories were therefore *engagement*, *education*, *research*, *evaluation*, *justification*, and *purchase*. The interviews were read again, and initial coding was done. Occurring themes and topics in the transcripts were coded to their corresponding categories, and the coding included words and sentences. Furthermore, the interviews were read few times over and the coding was modified and refined if necessary. Based on the analysis, customer journey models for each prospect were created. The customer journey models alongside suggested inbound marketing methods are presented in chapter 6.

6 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The goal of this thesis was to investigate how interaction can be increased among B2B prospects when buying professional services. The interaction was analysed from two different aspects, first by defining the customer journeys of prospects and second, to suggest suitable inbound marketing methods to support their customer journeys.

The thesis and therefore analysis focused on the pre-purchase stages – *engagement, education, research, evaluation, justification, and purchase* – of Deasi's (2016) customer journey model that was explained more in detail in chapter 3. Based on the interviews with CEOs of different companies from the architecture, engineering, and IT industries, eight different customer journeys were created. Each customer journey is analysed first one by one and citations from interviews are taken to support the analysis. The interviews were all conducted in Finnish but translated to English for the thesis by the researcher. After analysis, customer profiles were created of the research participants to be able to suggest suitable inbound marketing methods, which are presented in chapter 6.5. Customer journeys were combined based on similar buying behaviours and industries to be able to make the inbound marketing suggestions since companies cannot design marketing activities for each individual customer.

6.1 Customer journeys of architecture companies

The analysis starts with the customer journeys of architecture companies. Based on both interviews with the CEOs of architecture companies, two customer journey models were created. The models are presented and analysed using citations from the interviews.

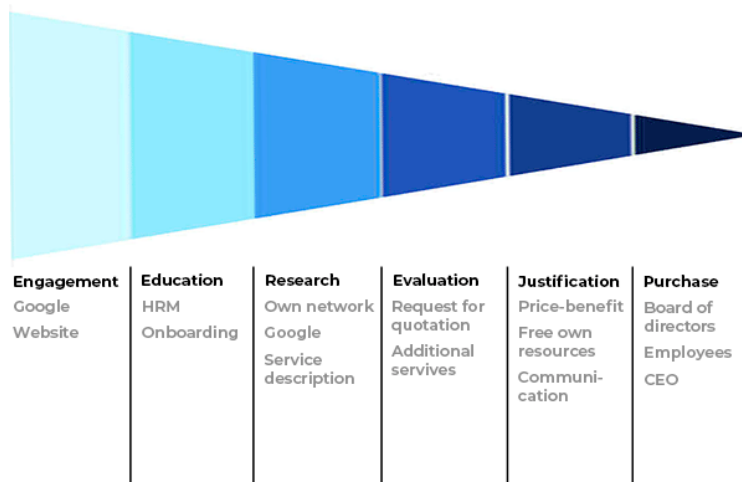


Figure 5. Customer journey model of architecture company X.

Figure 5. demonstrates the customer journey of architecture company X. The preferred way to engage with the specific company on *engagement* stage is through the supplier company's website that can be found with Google search: *"Firstly, I would probably look at different service provider's websites online. I would search them from Google."* Therefore, supplier company needs to make sure that their website can be found with Google search with SEO tactics.

Concerning *education* stage, architecture company X mentioned the problem in HR to be human resource management (HRM): *"When there are more employees, the more HRM is needed... How to take care of occupational health services and judicial vacation related-matters. How to communicate these to new employees. We have tried to create a personnel guide but that could be developed further... How to transfer information to employees."* Thus, the main problem for the prospect was how to transfer information to new employees to get them onboard easily. As the content of the supplier company needs to address the challenges of the customer, the content, in this case, should be about HRM i.e., how to create a personnel guide, what is onboarding, and the benefits of it.

The architecture company X would research different service providers within their own network and from Google: *"I would ask from other entrepreneurs...Of course Google different service providers..."* Therefore, it is important to handle all the customer cases well to leave a good impression and high customer satisfaction.

Applying SEO tactics to be found online is important as well on this stage. The things that the architecture company X would like to know on *research* stage are the price, service description and how much resources are required from the customer: *“I would like to know how much is required from me and how involved I have to be. Price and what it consists of... A little bit of content, what is the package that we would receive.”* Thus, the supplier’s services must be clearly described, what they consist of, and what are the prices of them.

On *evaluation* stage, the architecture company X would evaluate the service by asking for a quotation of the service: *“I ask a request for quotation of the service, how much it is and what it consists of...”* However, the company representative stated that they would not buy an HR services alone, but it would have to include additional services: *“I do not see buying an HR service alone. It would have to include other services such as financial management services. They could have book-keeping, financial management, or payroll calculations.”* Hence, the supplier company needs to consider what all additional services to include in the HR services. However, it must be kept in mind what are the company’s core competencies and knowledge base and would adding financial management services to the service offering be profitable.

To justify purchasing the HR service, architecture company X stated that the service must cut the CEO’s hours that are put into HR work: *“The service should eliminate my hours that I put into HR work. I could concentrate more on work relating to designing, leading, and making offers...”* Further things that are considered in the *justification* stage are the price-benefit, contact person, and how the communication works between the supplier and the customer: *“What is the benefit-price... Price affects and how the communication between us works. There must be one person with whom we deal with... Communication would be easy, and we would receive answers fast.”* What the supplier company needs to communicate at this stage are the benefits of the HR service, especially how the service would free time-resources of the CEO and allow him/her to concentrate on their work that brings money to the customer’s company.

On *purchase* stage, the purchase in the architecture company X is typically done by the CEO, or in bigger purchases, by the board of directors. However, the final purchase

decision is done together: *"Typically I make the purchase decision. In bigger decisions the board of directors does it. Some smaller purchases are made with employees... Who wants to be involved, but typically, always together."* Therefore, the benefits and value of the service must be made clear to the board of directors, not only just to the CEO of the prospective company.

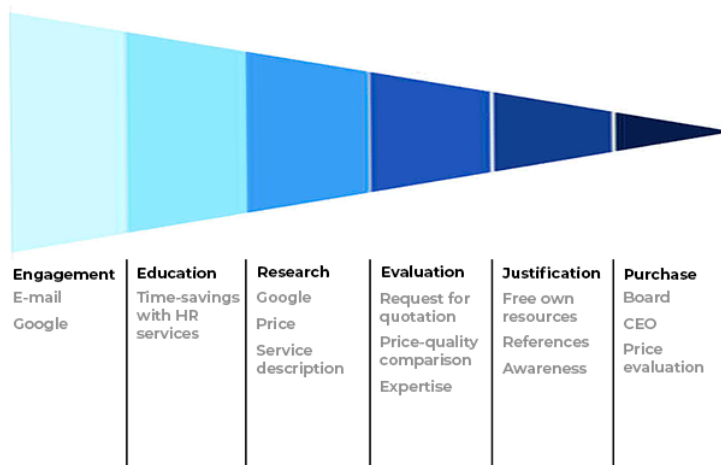


Figure 6. Customer journey model of architecture company Y.

The customer journey of the architecture company is presented in figure 6. The preferred engagement method for the specific company on *engagement* stage was via e-mail: *"If someone approaches me, then they should do it via e-mail."* Furthermore, Google was seen as another good option: *"But if I am proactive, then I would probably Google different service providers online."* The supplier company, thus, must consider the option of e-mail marketing to reach prospects like architecture company Y. Furthermore, the supplier company needs to make sure they are found on Google with SEO tactics when searching for HR services.

The problem for the architecture company Y on *education* stage was that HR work takes a lot of the resources of different people in the company: *"HR work takes a lot of work hours. I do not have time at all for designing... Our business development manager, who takes care of some HR work, some of his work hours are cut from sales, marketing, and customer management."* The message that should be highlighted at this stage is that outsourcing HR would free the resources of customer company allowing the people in question to focus on their own work.

On *research* stage the architecture company Y searches for service offerings from Google: *“I would probably start Googling first. If I had something specific on my mind, I would start investigating who offers these kinds of services...”* The information the prospective customer would look for are the service description and the price: *“Of course, you have to understand the bundle of services. What the service provider offers, of course, price is one matter... It is important to understand the price effect.”* Therefore, the service description and price need to be clearly stated, especially on the supplier company’s website.

On *evaluation* stage, the architecture company Y would do an evaluation based on a request for quotation. Evaluation would also include price-quality comparison and evaluation of the expertise of the company, and how much the service would free their own resources to other work: *“Pricing is one of the main criteria. I would take requests for quotations from other service providers... We would do a price-quality comparison. We would give points and make a purchase decision based on that. If we decided to buy an HR service, we would expect professional expertise... On the other hand, also remove some of our workloads.”* On this stage for architecture company X, the emphasis is on the supplier company’s personnel and their expertise, and the marketing message must include the freeing of customer’s resources to other work.

On *justification* stage, the architecture company Y would make the justification to buy the HR service based on the benefits of it, price-quality comparison, references, and awareness of the supplier company: *“The service would have to be affordable as a whole. Even if it costs, it must free our own resources to other work... We would try to do a price-quality comparison... Of course, the service provider’s references, and awareness affects. Overall, how long they have been in the business.”* Thus, the supplier company needs to utilise references in the marketing and increase brand awareness. As in the other stages, also highlight at this stage the benefit of being able to free some of the resources of the prospective company’s employees to other work.

The buying decision on *purchase* stage is made usually within a management team, of which the CEO is a part: *“I would take part in the purchase decision as a CEO and depending on the purchase, we have quite an active board of directors. We would make a final decision in the management team... We would evaluate if it were cost-*

effective.” As other people than just CEO are involved in the purchase decision, the supplier company must try to influence all others in the management team and make them realise that the service provides value for them.

6.2 Customer journeys of engineering companies

After examining the customer journeys of architecture companies, the customer journeys of engineering companies are presented and analysed. Based on the interviews with the CEOs of engineering companies, two customer journey models were created.

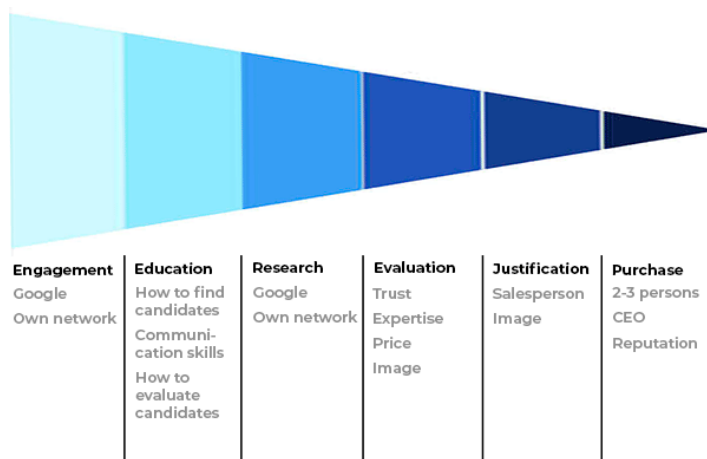


Figure 7. Customer journey model of engineering company X.

Figure 7. shows the customer journey of engineering company X. The best way to engage with the specific company on *engagement* stage is through Google search. Furthermore, the engagement would also be done within the prospective customer’s own network: *“I would search from Google. It is number one these days. Also, I would utilise my own network.”* The supplier company must therefore apply SEO tactics to be found on the search engines and network with companies in the area. Furthermore, leaving good experiences for existing customers increases positive WOM.

Concerning *education* stage, the problems in HR for the prospect were finding suitable candidates, HRM and not being able to trust recruitment companies: *“It is difficult to find experts... There are sometimes challenges in HRM. Some misunderstandings*

when one says this and the other that... There are some companies that sell CVs, it always costs something, and you cannot trust what is the end result. It is helpful to use outside analysis." The content must thus include the topics of how to recruit and find suitable candidates, communication skills in the workplace, and how to evaluate candidates by using an analysis, to attract the interest of prospects such as engineering company X.

Searching for information on *research* stage would be done through Google or within own network: *"I would try to find information within my own network or from Google."* Hence, SEO tactics must be applied to be found on search engines, network with other companies in the area and take care of customer satisfaction to increase positive WOM.

On *evaluation* stage, the engineering company X would assess the trustworthiness and professionalism of the supplier company. However, the company representative could not explain these terms more in detail. Further aspects that would be evaluated are price, the image of the company, and the projects it has done during the years: *"I want to know if the service provider is trustworthy and professional. These are subjective meanings. Price... The mental image of the company. In a written form, what they have done during the years."* Hence, to enhance the professional and trustworthy image, efforts to building a professional brand should be made. Furthermore, the prices of the services must be clearly stated and present references of customer projects that have been done over the years.

To justify the purchase on *justification* stage, it depends a lot on the salesperson of the company, how he/she sells the service according to the representative of engineering company X: *"The salesperson in the company, how she/he performs. How she/he sells themselves and then the service. Image selling."* Furthermore, to justify the purchase, the service should deliver a wanted end result: *"...The service should provide a good end result, a result we want."* At this stage, the emphasis is on the professionals of the supplier company, on the personal relations between the two parties, and how well the representative of the supplier company is able to sell the service.

On *purchase* stage, the final buying decision is typically made by the CEO in engineering company X. However, 2-3 people participate in the buying decision and the purchase is based on the reputation and the image of the supplier company: “2-3 persons take part in the buying decision depending on the purchase... The final buying decision is done by CEO... It affects what kind of reputation they have. What kind of message is left somewhere in the memory.” Therefore, it is important to especially influence the CEO, but also other persons in question. To get an incline about the reputation, customer satisfaction must be measured and to collect feedback from both customers and non-customers. Furthermore, it is critical to handle existing customer projects well to increase positive WOM, which has an impact on the reputation of the supplier company.

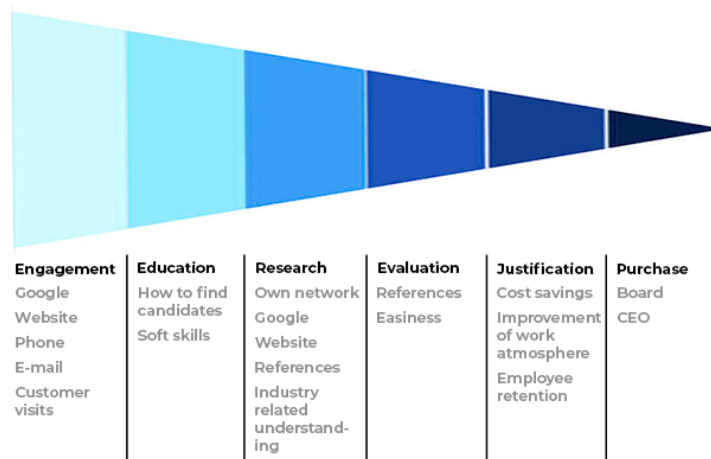


Figure 8. Customer journey model of engineering company Y.

The customer journey model of engineering company Y is presented in figure 8. above. On *engagement* level, the best possible ways to engage with the prospects were through Google and personal contacting. Personal contacting includes cold calling or e-mail and after the contact has been made, customer visits: “*I would want to learn about service offerings on the company’s website. I would use Google for that... Also, that you make a contact. Phone in your hand or e-mail... Customer visits.*” The supplier company, hence, must apply SEO tactics so that prospects can find them from search engines. Furthermore, more traditional marketing methods, cold calling, and e-mail marketing must be applied to be able to engage with prospects like engineering company Y.

The problems in HR for engineering company Y were in recruitment. Existing recruitment service providers were not capable of finding the right candidate for the job, since the soft skills were not considered at all: *“A service provider could help in recruitment... There are difficult recruitments. Normal recruitment service providers cannot find the qualities we are looking for... We value people who can handle pressure and are flexible.”* To attract the attention of engineering company Y and provide them with content that is of value, the content must include how candidates are evaluated so that they fit the company culture and team. The supplier company must highlight that the selection of candidates is not based purely on CVs.

On *research* stage, the engineering company Y searches for information from Google and within its own network: *“I would Google HR services or help in recruitment and start from the company websites... Ask from own network...”* The information that is wanted to be known at this stage are references, the process of introducing candidates, mentioning of which specific field the company has worked in, and to understand that candidates are not just CVs: *“The website must be interesting, there must be references and the process of introducing candidates. The service provider should have knowledge of the customer’s industry. So that they can connect the right candidates and understand customer’s business... The service provider must understand that people are just not CVs... Certain qualities are looked for in a person.”* On this stage, SEO tactics must be applied as well. In marketing, references, the process of introducing candidates, mentioning of industry-specific knowledge, and how candidates are evaluated must be presented.

On *evaluation* stage, the engineering company Y would evaluate the service mainly based on references: *“One main criterion is if they have references from this industry and with which companies they have co-operated with...”* Furthermore, the company would expect easiness from the supplier company, meaning that they would handle all scheduling related to the project: *“We would expect easiness... They would handle scheduling and get the candidate to be in the right place.”* On this stage, references that mention the customer company and industry must be presented. Furthermore, easiness of the co-operation falls onto the professionals of the supplier company, to make sure everything goes smoothly and easily for the customer.

The engineering company Y did not see it possible to outsource HR, but only some parts of it, such as recruitment: *“It would be very difficult to outsource HR in this kind of company... Parts can be outsourced, like recruitment...”* However, the justification to buy an HR service on *justification* stage would be based on cost-savings and if the service would enhance employee retention and work atmosphere: *“We would evaluate if we received cost-savings. In this kind of company, we cannot lose a single employee... An outsider could detect if people are not feeling well... Improve work atmosphere.”* Marketing at this point must highlight the benefits that could be received with an HR service, i.e., improvement of work atmosphere that could result in better employee retention. Other aspects to highlight in marketing could be the cost-savings gained when employees do not leave to company. Cost-savings when the prospective company does not have to hire new employees and arrange onboarding.

The buying decision on *purchase* stage is made by the board of directors: *“Board of directors make the buying decision. We discuss until everyone agrees...”* In the interview, it was mentioned that someone needs to lead the group: *“However, in the ship, there must be a captain.”* As decisions to buy professional services, such as HR services, are decided in a group, it is important to make all realise in the prospective company the benefits of HR services.

6.3 Customer journeys of IT consultant companies

Next, the customer journeys of IT consultant companies are presented and analysed. Two CEOs of IT consultant companies were interviewed and based on the interviews, customer journeys for each were drawn. The analysis is supported with citations from the interviews.

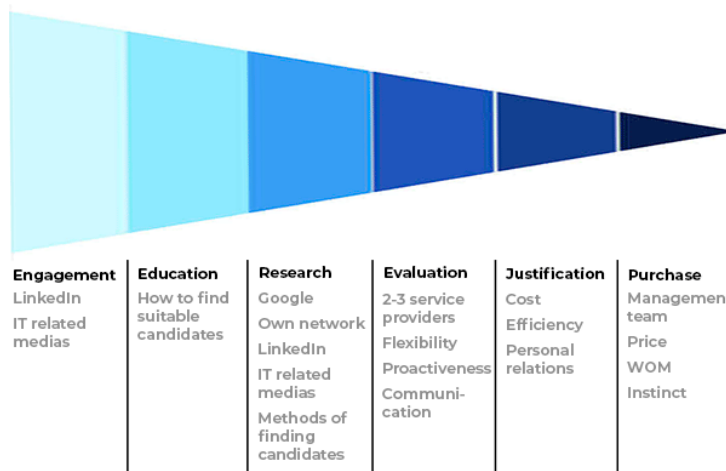


Figure 9. Customer journey model of IT consultant company X.

Figure 9. demonstrates the customer journey model stages of IT consultant company X. On *engagement* stage, the best ways to engage with the prospective customer are through LinkedIn and IT-related medias: *“Maybe in industry-related specific media and LinkedIn... Most effective, not maybe anything else.”* Thus, the supplier company must be present on social media and do SMM, especially on LinkedIn. Furthermore, advertise on IT related media to reach prospects like IT consultant company X.

For *education* stage, the IT consultant company X mentioned the biggest problem in HR to be finding suitable candidates: *“The biggest challenge is to find suitable candidates that match a certain profile we are looking for. We sometimes use headhunting services when there are difficult recruitments.”* However, it was not seen possible to outsource HR due to not being able to integrate an outside service provider with the customer company: *“The issue of outsourcing HR is how to integrate it to be part of the team.”* To attract the interest of IT consultant company X, the supplier company must educate prospects on recruitment. How to recruit and find suitable candidates. For the objection of not being able to outsource HR due to integration issues, the supplier company must address this issue and in the best case scenario, provide references.

IT consultant company X searches for information on *research* stage within their own network and Google, and stumbles upon relevant information on LinkedIn or on industry-specific media: *“I would probably ask from my own network; from people I*

know. Sometimes you hear about these on LinkedIn and industry specific medias. Traditional Google is a good way to find needs...” The information that is researched at this stage are others’ experiences, methods of recruitment, and being able to commit to certain schedules: *“But I want to gladly hear others’ experiences... I want to know what the methods are of finding candidates. If the service provider can commit to certain schedules.”* The supplier company must make sure they are found on search engines with SEO tactics, do SMM on LinkedIn, and paid advertising on IT related media. It is important to assure customer satisfaction with current customers to increase positive WOM. Furthermore, the content in marketing must include the process of finding candidates and if the supplier company can commit to different schedules.

On *evaluation* stage, IT consultant company X shortlists different service providers to assess them. The evaluation would also include the service providers proactiveness, flexibility, and communication: *“I shortlist 2-3 potential service providers and have discussions with them... I would expect proactiveness and flexibility... To share information a lot.”* The attention on this stage is on personal relations and on the professional of the supplier company to manage the relationship.

On *justification* stage, IT consultant company X makes the justification to buy HR service based on it performing better than their in-house operations: *“It would have to work better than our organisation. Typically outsourcing is more expensive than doing things in-house... In our industry, the cost plays a role, how much the outsourcing costs vs. in-house operation...”* Furthermore, in addition to price, another aspect that is evaluated is with whom the prospective company has the best relationship: *“It affects what kind of feeling you are left with from the conversations... With whom you have the best connection with. You get the feeling that they understand your needs.”* As in evaluation stage, on this stage the emphasis is also on personal relations and on the professional(s) of the supplier company to manage the relationship with the prospective customer.

Regarding *purchase* stage, the buying decision is typically made within a management team: *“Purchase decision is mainly done on management team -level...”* Only price does not affect the final purchase decision, but also the feeling in the situation and

others' experiences of the supplier company: *"It affects if someone in the network has had good or bad experiences... How it feels. You cannot make a decision only based on price."* As the buying decision is done by a management team, it is important to try to influence all and not just the CEO of the company. To be able to justify the HR service to all. Furthermore, existing customers' satisfaction is important and is evaluated before the buying, therefore customer satisfaction must be measured and ensured.

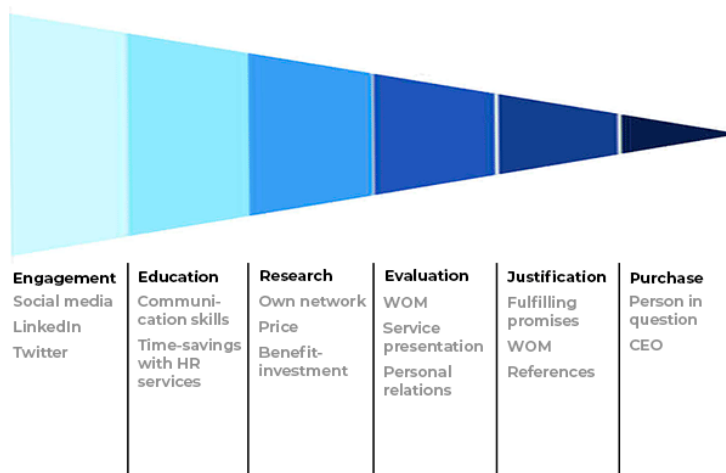


Figure 10. Customer journey model of IT consultant company Y.

Figure 10. shows the customer journey of IT consult company Y. On the first stage, *engagement*, the prospective company is reached best through social media, such as LinkedIn and Twitter: *"The best channel is probably social media, maybe LinkedIn and also Twitter..."* Sending e-mail was not seen as a good way to engage: *"Sending e-mail does not work in my opinion."* Hence, the supplier company must be present on social media, especially on LinkedIn and Twitter to be able to engage with prospects like IT consultant company Y.

Regarding *education* stage, the CEO of IT consultant company Y did not see any issues in HR yet, but it was seen possible for issues to emerge at a later phase as the company grows: *"We have not had any problems... There could be challenges later... When you do HR work on top of your own work, the amount of HR work grows when there are more employees..."* However, it was seen possible to outsource HR and the company had already used recruitment services: *"I do not see problems in outsourcing HR."*

Recruitment is something that can be outsourced. We have used recruitment services that make the first selection of candidates.” To educate consultant company Y, the content in marketing could include benefits of HR service, i.e., time-savings, and also recruitment.

On *research* stage, IT consultant company Y finds information within their own network: *“I would call through my own acquaintances. HR managers I know and ask if they have good references...”* At this stage, it is wanted to be known what the price is, benefit vs. investment ratio and others’ experiences of the service provider: *“Price is something that always interests... Benefit-investment comparison... Price does not play a big role if there is a good experience about the service provider...”* To provide IT consultant company Y with valuable content, it should include the prices of HR services and references. It would also be beneficial for the supplier company to network with HR managers in the area.

Regarding *evaluation* stage, the evaluation of the service would be done by getting familiar with the service, hearing others’ recommendations, and assessing personal relations with the supplier company: *“When you do not know about the service provider or about the thing, you compare these service providers... Regarding HR services, more time would be taken to get to know it and if we got good references from the network who to contact... If we get along with the company representative and she/he presents things clearly and we felt that we received value...”* What was expected of the supplier company was that the customer gets what is promised: *“That we get what we buy.”* The focal point on this stage is on the professional(s) of the supplier company. How well they communicate about the service and if they are able to provide value for the prospect and deliver what is promised for the customer.

On *justification* stage, the reasonings for buying the HR service are recommendations, checking the trustworthiness of the supplier company and if they keep their promises: *“Start to fulfil the promises when the service has been bought... Recommendations from own network affect the decision. Or if the company have references of people I know; I could ask the company’s trustworthiness from them.”* Thus, it is important to have good references and make sure that existing customers are satisfied with the service to avoid negative WOM.

The buying decision on *purchase* stage is done typically by a CEO in a start-up. However, the final decision is done in a group: *“Typically the CEO and a person that the matter concerns. The person who is sitting on the moneybag. If we are talking about a start-up, the CEO is usually the one who makes the purchase decision... The final buying decision is done in a group, we sit together and decide that this is good.”* On this stage, it is critical to be able to make others realise the value of the service, not just the CEO.

6.4 Customer journeys of IT software development companies

In this chapter, the customer journeys of IT software development companies are presented and analysed. Based on two interviews with the CEOs of IT software development companies, two customer journeys were created. The analysis is supported with citations from the interviews.

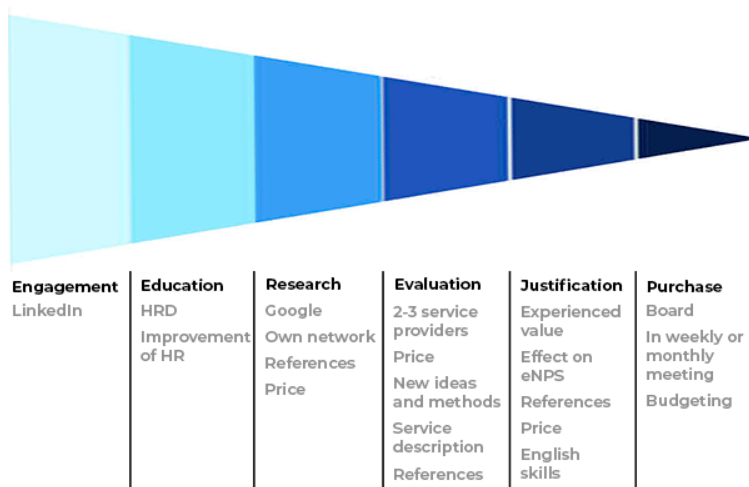


Figure 11. Customer journey model of IT software development company X.

Figure 11. above demonstrates the customer journey of IT software development company X. On *engagement* stage, the preferred method of engagement was LinkedIn: *“LinkedIn is a good channel... When it is targeted, the channel does not matter that much... Channel that does not interest many is contacting by calling.”* The CEO of IT software development company X further explained that the channels where companies engage with customers do not matter that much if it is targeted, however,

cold calling was seen as a poor way to reach customers. Thus, the supplier company must be where the customer is, and in this scenario, on LinkedIn.

On *education* stage, the biggest problem for IT software development company X was the development of HR and how it can best support the business: *“The challenge is that when HRM takes a lot of time, how to have time for HRD... How HR has developed and will develop in the future... That HR supports the development of the business.”* Content on this stage to educate the prospect must include topics of HR development and how HR can support the business and how to improve it to attract the attention of the prospect and offer content that is interesting for them.

CEO of IT software development company X would search for different service providers from Google and within their own network: *“I would try to find information from my own network and through Google...”* At this stage, the company representative would like to know a concrete description of the service and price: *“Some examples that are concrete, what the service could mean... A concrete description through reference stories to get a grasp of it. Of course, price interests.”* Therefore, the supplier company needs to have clear service descriptions with prices. Furthermore, to support the service descriptions with good and concrete references to help prospects to understand the service and service impact.

On *evaluation* stage, the evaluation is done by ranking 2-3 different service providers: *“We typically compare 2-3 different service providers and start ranking them based on different criteria... An Excel-type table with the service providers’ names in their own lines and in another axel, service description, price, references...”* Things that would affect the evaluation are the capability of the supplier company to bring the best practices and views to the customer company: *“That they would bring some new views... A new way of doing things and best practices maybe from other companies like us.”* On this stage, the emphasis is on the professional(s) of the supplier company and their knowledge base to be able to bring the best methods and new ways of doing to the customer company. Thus, it is important for professional service firms to invest in the knowledge acquisition to provide the best solutions to customers’ problems and to create value. Furthermore, it is good to be aware of what competitors are doing.

On *justification* stage, to justify the buying of professional HR services depends on the experienced value and whether the service would have a positive effect on the IT software development company's eNPS (Employee Net Promoter Score): *"What is the experienced value... Some kind of positive effect on eNPS. Effect on the end scoring or on its sub-category."* The selection of service provider is made based on the service, price, references, and maybe schedule: *"Based on the service content, price, and references. The references could be split into two. Other companies who have used the service and the company representative's references. What kind of CV the person has that would work with us... Price and maybe schedule, depending on the project."* Hence, to be able to meet the justifications of the IT software development company X, the supplier company must invest in references. To produce not only project references of the company but also references and CVs of the professionals of the supplier company. To create value, the supplier company must acknowledge the value creation processes, goals, and measurements of the goals of the prospective company. For IT software development company X, the goals of HR are measured with eNPS, which the supplier company must take into consideration and align their services with these measurements.

The buying of HR services on *purchase* stage is done among the board of directors in weekly- or monthly meetings depending on the importance of it: *"HR manager and board of directors... Our work language is English so one main criterion is that the company can offer the service in English... The buying of HR services would be brought to our weekly- or monthly meetings... Based on how important the matter is... If the purchase is bigger, it should be budgeted. In many cases, it could be difficult to sell HR services at the beginning of the year."* As the buying decision is done by the board of directors in the software development company X, the supplier company must influence more people than just the CEO. Furthermore, as the company language is English in this specific prospect company, the supplier company must be able to produce the service in English. To let the prospect know of this, some of the content and marketing could be done in English. The supplier company must also take into consideration when bigger HR services are sold, as it might require budgeting from the prospect.

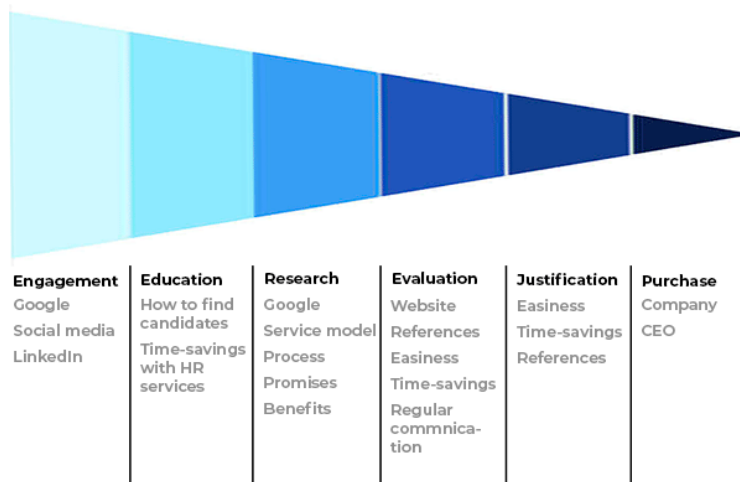


Figure 12. Customer journey model of IT software development company Y.

The customer journey model of IT software development company Y is presented in figure 12. The best channels and media for engaging with the company on *engagement* stage were Google and social media: *“Google is definitely important. Also, social media channels, LinkedIn being definitely the most important one of these.”* Hence, the supplier company must apply SEO tactics to be found on search engines by prospects. Furthermore, to reach and engage with IT software development company Y, the supplier company must do social media marketing, especially on LinkedIn as it was the most important one.

The issue for IT software development company Y that must be taken into consideration in creating content on *education* stage was recruitment: *“Not that many challenges. Maybe time challenges because interviews consume a lot of time. There are difficulties in recruitment to find senior-level employees... No challenges in HR, but in recruitment.”* Thus, this prospect could be educated on how to recruit, find suitable candidates, and how to get them interested in the recruiting company.

On *research* stage, the IT software development company Y searches for information on Google: *“Google is number one, I would search for information there.”* The information that is wanted to know at this stage is the service model and how it would help the customer: *“Service model. How the process goes. What promises the service has and how the service would help.”* Thus, marketing content must include the service model, its process, promises, and what it means for the customer.

Assessing service providers on *evaluation* stage is done by reading the supplier companies' websites and references: *"I do evaluate service providers and their websites to see what is said about the company. References are really important."* What the IT software development company Y expects from HR services are easiness, meaning that the CEO of customer company would be disturbed little as possible and time-savings would be gained when the supplier company handled the interviews: *"Easiness and time-savings. Regular contact and keeping up-to-date."* Thus, it is crucial that the website of the supplier company is in a good condition, since the website is used for evaluating different service providers. Furthermore, as references were important for the prospect, the supplier company must invest in producing and promoting references. At this stage, the emphasis is also on the professional(s) of the supplier company to manage the relationship with the customer and to take care of the outsourced work.

On *justification* stage, the justifications for making the buying decisions are similar as in the previous, *evaluation*, stage. The HR service must provide the IT software company development company Y time savings and it must be easy for the customer company: *"That the service would disturb the CEO as little as possible. The company would handle interviews which would lead to time-savings."* Therefore, the marketing message must include the benefits of time-savings for the customer company and that the use of it does not require much resources from the customer.

On *purchase* stage, the buying decision is made together with all the company employees, however, the final decision is up to the CEO: *"The buying decision is made together with the whole company. In the end, the CEO makes the final buying decision."* Therefore, the supplier company must especially try to influence the CEO, but also others in the prospect company to see the value and benefits of the HR service.

6.5 Summary of customer journeys and inbound marketing suggestions

Some similar patterns in the customer journeys and buying behaviour were noticed, which allowed the combination of them to create more general customer profiles. The similarities were seen especially in how the research participants wanted to be engaged with and what their problems in HR were. The preferred methods of engagement and

problems in HR were similar with companies of the same industries, hence the customer journeys of companies from the same industries were combined to create a more general customer profiles. Therefore, three customer profiles were created: architecture, engineering, and IT customer profiles. After combining the customer journeys, suitable inbound marketing tactics were introduced. However, it became clear during the process of suggesting inbound marketing tactics, that many of the stages required other marketing actions as well. Therefore, traditional marketing and relationship marketing tactics were added to be able to address all the needs in the prospects' customer journeys. To understand the relationship tactics presented later in this chapter, the concept of relationship marketing is first explained.

When the relationships between the supplier and the customers are good, customers are more likely to have confidence and trust in the supplier company while feeling satisfied (Yu, 2011). Identifying, developing, maintaining, and terminating these relationships with the aim of enhancing performance is called relationship marketing (Palmatier, 2008, p. 3). There are different types of relationship marketing: social bonds, structural bonds, (Rao & Perry, 2002), and financial bonds (Wang, 2008). Social bonds are investments, i.e., organisational contacts or personal ones, made to produce a positive relationship between the parties that leads to commitment and trust. Structural bonds, in contrast, are made when companies adapt to each other in a technical or an economic way, i.e., process or product adjustments. (Rao & Perry, 2002.) With financial bonds, companies try to maintain customer loyalty through price incentives or by offering gifts for long-time customers, however, relationships fostered with financial bonds are typically short (Yu & Tung, 2013).

6.5.1 Architecture companies

The customer journeys of architecture companies were combined to create one profile for architecture companies. The customer journey is presented once more to be able to make suggestions for marketing tactics. The customer journey and marketing tactics are presented in table 4. below.

Table 4. Customer journey and inbound marketing suggestions for architecture customer profile.

	Customer journey	Inbound marketing	Traditional marketing	Relationship marketing
Engagement	Google, E-mail, Own network	SEO, Google, AdWords	E-mail marketing	Customer loyalty → WOM
Education	HRM, Onboarding, Time-savings with HR services	Content marketing, Blog		
Research	<u>Where:</u> Google, Own network <u>What:</u> Service description, Price	SEO, Google, AdWords, Content marketing		Customer loyalty → WOM
Evaluation	Request for quotation, Price-quality comparison, Expertise, Additional services	Brand-focused marketing communication		Structural bonds → additional services
Justification	Price-benefit, Free own resources, Communication, References, Awareness	Content marketing, Brand-focused marketing communication		Social bonds → interaction quality
Purchase	Board of directors, Employees, CEO, <u>What affects:</u> Price evaluation			

Being able to engage with prospects fitting this customer profile, requires inbound marketing, traditional marketing, and relationship marketing. To reach prospects on Google, the supplier company must apply SEO tactics and consider doing e-mail marketing, which is a traditional marketing tactic. Furthermore, paid advertising on Google should be done to help prospects to find the supplier company's website. When it comes to relationship marketing, by successfully implementing it, customer loyalty increases which helps to spread positive WOM of the supplier company by loyal current customers. To educate this customer profile, it requires planning a content marketing strategy about HRM, onboarding, and the benefits of the service for the

customer (mainly time-savings), which could be done in the form of a blog and e-mail marketing. To help the prospects of this customer profile to search for information requires implementing SEO, producing content of the services (service description and price), and managing successful relationship marketing that increases customer loyalty, and thus, positive WOM.

To convince prospects of this customer profile to see the value of HR services, it requires brand-focused marketing communication to build a professional brand that is seen as an expert brand by the prospects. By implementing a relationship marketing type, structural bonds, it helps the supplier company to offer prospects additional services that might provide value for them. To help prospects make the justification to buy the professional service requires content marketing strategy (references, and benefits of the service for the customer), brand-focused marketing communication to raise awareness of the supplier company, and implementing social bonds so that the interaction quality increases. To affect the final buying decision, the supplier company must assess the prices of the services and make sure that not only the CEO, but others in the company see the value of HR services.

6.5.2 Engineering companies

The customer journeys of engineering companies were merged together to create one customer profile. After combining the customer journeys, the suggestions for marketing tactics were possible to do, to help the prospects who fit this customer profile to move through the stages in their customer journeys. These marketing tactics are presented next in table 5. below.

Table 5. Customer journey and inbound marketing suggestions for engineering customer profile.

	Customer journey	Inbound marketing	Traditional marketing	Relationship marketing
Engagement	Google, Website, Phone, E-mail, Customer visits, Own network	SEO, Google AdWords	E-mail marketing, Cold calling	Customer loyalty → WOM
Education	Recruitment (finding & evaluating candidates), Importance of soft	Content marketing, Blog		

	skills, Communication skills			
Research	<u>Where:</u> Google, Own network, Website <u>What:</u> References, Industry related understanding	SEO, Google AdWords, Content marketing		Customer loyalty → WOM
Evaluation	Trust, Expertise, Price, Image, Easiness, References	Content marketing, Brand-focused marketing communication		Social bonds → interaction quality
Justification	Salesperson skills, Image, Cost savings, Improvement of work atmosphere, Employee retention	Content marketing		Social bonds → interaction quality
Purchase	Board, CEO, 2-3 persons <u>What affects:</u> Reputation	Brand-focused marketing communication		Customer loyalty → WOM

To reach these prospects involves SEO tactics to be found on search engines, but also traditional marketing methods, such as e-mail marketing and cold calling. By successfully implementing relationship marketing, the loyal customers are more likely to spread positive WOM of the supplier company. Furthermore, the supplier company can do paid advertising on Google to facilitate the finding of the company website on Google. To educate the prospects requires planning a content marketing strategy that includes the topics of recruitment (finding and evaluating candidates), communication skills at the workplace, and how to assess the soft skills of candidates. To facilitate the information search of the prospects fitting this customer profile, it requires SEO and content marketing strategies. Furthermore, content about references and knowledge of customers' industries must be produced.

By applying content marketing strategy and brand-focused marketing communication, it helps prospects to evaluate the service. Content marketing must include references and with the help of brand-focused marketing communication, the supplier's image and expertise can be enhanced. Furthermore, by implementing social bonds type of

relationship marketing, it increases the quality of interaction, assuring easiness of the service for the prospect. To help prospects of this customer profile to justify the service, a content marketing strategy is needed that includes the topics of references, benefits of the service for the prospect, and cost-savings made with the HR service. To encourage engineering prospects to make a buying decision involves brand-focused communication and one of relationship marketing type, social bonds, to strengthen the reputation of the supplier company.

6.5.3 IT companies

The IT customer journeys were also combined to create a one customer profile. The similarities in the buying behaviour were considered to be strong enough to be able to do so. The combined customer journey and the marketing suggestions for each stage in the customer journey are presented in table 6. below.

Table 6. Customer journey and inbound marketing suggestions for IT customer profile.

	Customer journey	Inbound marketing	Traditional marketing	Relationship marketing
Engagement	Social media (LinkedIn & Twitter), IT related medias, Google	SMM, SEO, Google AdWords	Paid advertising on IT medias	
Education	How to find candidates, Communication skills, Time savings with HR services, HRD and improvement of HR	Content marketing		
Research	<u>Where:</u> Google, Own network, LinkedIn, IT related medias <u>What:</u> Methods of finding candidates, Price, Benefits-investment, References, Service model and process, Promises	SEO, SMM, Content marketing, Blog, Videos	Paid advertising on IT medias	Customer loyalty → WOM
Evaluation	<u>How:</u> Company website, 2–3 service providers, WOM <u>What:</u> References,	Content marketing		Customer loyalty → WOM, Social bonds → interaction

	Service description, Time-savings, Price, If able to produce new ideas, Communication/proactiveness, Easiness/flexibility, Personal relations, Service delivery			quality, trust, Structure bonds → customised services
Justification	Cost, Efficiency & time-savings, Easiness, References, WOM, Experienced value, Effect on eNPS, English skills, Personal relations	Content marketing		Customer loyalty → WOM, Social bonds → interaction quality, trust
Purchase	Whole company, Board of directors, CEO, Person in questions, Budgeting, In weekly or monthly meetings, <u>Affect the buying decision:</u> Price, WOM, Instinct			Customer loyalty → WOM

Inbound marketing methods of SMM and SEO must be applied to reach the IT prospects, but also to do paid advertising on IT-related media. The supplier company can also do paid advertising on Google to better reach the IT prospects and target keywords they might use when Googling for HR services. Since most IT companies found the problem in HR to be recruitment, targeting keywords relating to recruitment is a good option. To educate these customers on their problems requires creating a content marketing strategy, the focus being on recruitment (3/4 IT research participants mentioned the problem in HR to be recruitment and especially finding senior-level employees). Other topics for the content strategy are the benefits of HR service for the customer (time-savings), HRD, and improvement of HR in the form of a blog or videos, for instance. To facilitate the research for information, the supplier company should apply a content marketing strategy at this stage also. Content about references, service descriptions, price, and benefits of the service. Other aspects are to do paid advertising on IT-related medias and to successfully implement relationship marketing to boost the spread of WOM by existing customers.

To help IT prospects evaluate the HR service requires creating a content marketing strategy and implementing relationship marketing. The content marketing strategy should include topics of references, service description, price, and benefits of the service for the prospect. At this stage, both structural bonds and social bonds of relationship marketing are needed. Social bonds help with increasing the quality of interaction, resulting in trust, commitment, and satisfaction, whereas structure bonds help with customising services for the customer. Successful relationship marketing can result in better customer loyalty, which boosts positive WOM. To make the justification of buying the HR service easier for the prospect, it requires content marketing that includes the topics of benefits of the service for the customer, references, and some of the content must be in English. Applying social bonds increases interaction quality between the prospect and the supplier company and creates trust. To get current customers to spread positive WOM, successful relationship marketing should be implemented. Furthermore, it is important to understand at this stage the value creation processes of the customer and how the goals of the customers are measured. For one research participant, the effects of HR were measured with eNPS. This means that the supplier company must be able to justify the HR service for the prospect using its own value creation processes and measurements, and in this specific instance, using eNPS. As WOM affects the final buying decision, the supplier company must ensure good relationship marketing to increase the loyalty of current customers and thus, increase positive WOM.

7 DISCUSSION

The purpose of this thesis was to examine how interaction can be increased among B2B prospects when buying professional services and it was studied from two aspects: first by defining the pre-purchase customer journeys of prospects and second, making suitable inbound marketing suggestions to facilitate the information search of the prospects and thus help them move through the different stages in their customer journeys. Furthermore, professional services were limited to HR services in this thesis. A qualitative research method and an abductive research strategy were utilised to answer the research question. CEOs of architecture, engineering, and IT industries were selected to be interviewed using a semi-structured interview method. 8 interviews were conducted and based on the analysis of the interviews, eight different customer journeys were created. More general customer profiles of the customer journeys were formed to make suggestions of inbound marketing tactics. The generalisation was made based on prospects' similarities in buying behaviour and these similarities were found between the companies within the same industries. After identifying possible inbound marketing tactics for each customer profile on different pre-purchase customer journey stages, it became evident that only inbound marketing is not enough and thus, traditional marketing and relationship marketing tactics were added.

On *engagement* stage, IT companies was the only customer group that preferred social media, especially LinkedIn, as an engagement method with supplier companies. They wanted to discover services themselves and preferred not to be disturbed. In contrast, engineering companies preferred more traditional marketing methods (cold calling and e-mail marketing) besides Google, and architecture companies also preferred methods of e-mail marketing and finding the supplier company's website on Google. For all customer groups, WOM within their own network was important in finding new services, and to facilitate this spread of positive WOM, the supplier company must successfully implement relationship marketing.

The problem in HR for IT companies was mainly recruitment and especially in finding suitable candidates. The same was for engineering companies, however, the issue was especially in finding candidates that have the required soft skills to be able to do the job. Furthermore, one engineering company mentioned problems to be sometimes in

communication, and more specifically in the information flow. Whereas for architecture companies the problems were mainly in HRM and HR work taking a lot of the time of the CEO. For all companies on the *education* stage, a content marketing strategy must be designed that addresses each customer group's problems to attract the attention of prospects and provide them with something of value.

On *research* stage, for all customer personas, Google and their own network was important when researching for service providers. In addition, IT companies wanted to find about new services on LinkedIn and one company representative from IT-related media. At this stage, it is important to do inbound marketing (SEO & SMM), traditional marketing (paid advertising on IT media), and relationship marketing to enhance the spread of positive WOM. Architecture company persona wants to find out about service description and prices of the services, whereas engineering companies references and a mentioning of industry-related understanding. IT companies had more things they wanted to find out at this stage, i.e., methods of finding candidates, benefit-investment, service model and processes, and promises. The supplier company must establish a content marketing strategy that covers these topics for different customer groups to facilitate their research process of finding information.

On *evaluation* stage, the emphasis is on personal relations and on the expert(s) of the supplier company to manage the relationship with prospects. For architecture companies, the evaluation of HR services is based on price-quality comparison, expertise, and additional services. To help the evaluation process the supplier company must do brand-focused marketing communication and structure bonds from relationship marketing to discover new opportunities for profitable additional services. For engineering companies, the evaluation is based on i.e., trust, expertise, image, easiness, and references. These require the supplier company to do brand-focused communication to enhance the image of the company and social bonds from relationship marketing to create trust and make the service delivery easier. For IT companies, all the before mentioned apply as well, and further things that are evaluated are the capability to produce new ideas and methods, communication quality and service delivery. It can be concluded that for all customer personas the emphasis at this stage is on relationship marketing, especially on structural bonds to produce new and customised solutions, and social bonds to facilitate the communication between

the parties. Furthermore, brand-focused communication is important at this stage, as well, to enhance the image of expertise of the supplier company.

When it comes to *justification* stage architecture companies justify buying the HR service by making a price-benefit comparison. Furthermore, they assess if the service frees their resources, what is the quality of communication, awareness of the company and what are the company references like. From marketing, this requires to successfully execute brand-focused marketing communication to increase the awareness and social bonds from relationship marketing to improve the communication between the two parties. For engineering companies, on the other hand, the justification is based on the salesperson skills to sell the service, what is the cost of the service and image of the company, and will the service improve work atmosphere and employee retention. This requires the supplier company to establish a content marketing strategy that covers the benefits of the service on the workplace and the cost-savings for the customer company.

Furthermore, on this *justification* stage, for IT customer persona, the justification criteria were similar as for the other two customer personas. The justification is based on cost, efficiency and easiness of the service, experienced value, time-savings gained, and personal relations. At this stage, the supplier company must implement social bonds from relationship marketing to enhance personal relations and communication and establish a content marketing strategy that covers references and benefits of the service. It is also important for the supplier company to be able to detect the value creation processes of the prospect and align the service with these processes to provide value for both the customer and the supplier company itself. As one IT prospect mentioned they would expect the supplier company's service to improve their eNPS, the supplier company must be able to measure their service impact with the measurements the prospect is using.

The stage that required the least marketing actions was *purchase* stage for all the prospects. At this stage, the service is evaluated typically by the CEO, board of directors, or in some cases, by the whole company. Therefore, before this stage it is important to try to make other people, in addition to the CEO, to see the value the service can provide for the company. However, what the supplier company can do at

this stage regarding marketing is to do brand-focused communication and enhance positive WOM by implementing successful relationship marketing to improve their own reputation.

On the first three stages, the emphasis is especially on inbound marketing but also on traditional marketing. However, traditional marketing tactics are mainly utilised on *engagement* stage to reach prospects. The most important inbound marketing tactic at this stage for all customer personas is SEO, and in addition, SMM for IT customer personas. The supplier company must establish a content marketing strategy that takes into consideration the problems of the prospect and educate them in the channels of their preference. From inbound marketing strategies, content marketing on the first stages was the most important, and especially on *education* stage. All customer personas preferred Google and their own network for finding information about services on *research* stage. Information all prospects wanted to find out about professional HR services were price and references. In addition, the engineering company profile wanted to know about industry-related understanding and IT companies about service model and process, benefits, promises of the services, and methods of finding candidates. The supplier company must make sure that all this information is available for prospects easily, thus, it should be on the company website since prospects use Google to search for information.

From *evaluation* stage onwards, only inbound marketing is not enough, and companies must implement relationship marketing, especially structural and social bonds, to establish a good relationship with the prospects, to ease the communication, and to create a sense of trust. It seems that in the professional service business, the supplier company cannot only rely on i.e., inbound marketing but they must put a lot of emphasis on personal relations and managing customer relations. For all customer personas, various aspects affect the *justification* stage to make the buying decision, from i.e., trust, to cost, and awareness, which requires the supplier company to establish inbound marketing and relationship marketing tactics. From inbound marketing this requires content marketing strategy and from relationship marketing, social bonds. At this stage it is also important to detect the value creation processes of the prospect, how they are measured, and take these into consideration by merging these with the supplier company's services to create value for both parties. On

purchase stage, the marketing actions are not that important anymore, however, the supplier company must increase positive WOM and brand-focused marketing communication to enhance their reputation. WOM, which is a result of successful relationship marketing, was influential on many of the pre-purchase customer journey stages. Therefore, the supplier company must handle the current customer projects well to increase positive WOM. From all inbound marketing tactics, content marketing and brand-focused marketing communication were the most important, hence, these are tactics the supplier companies cannot overlook.

Two out of eight of the prospects had a dedicated HR person in the company, and these companies did not see it possible to outsource HR, since the problem was for the “outsider” HR to be integrated into the company and into the team. Only one company saw the problem in HR to know how to develop it and to have enough time for HRD. When HR services were discussed in the interviews, many of the research participants talked only about recruitment and it was mainly seen possible to be outsourced by IT and engineering companies. Half of the research participants did not see any problems in HR, and if there were any, they were mostly time-related, meaning that HR work takes a lot of time of the CEO or other responsible person’s, and that time is taken away from their own work. HR work was mainly seen as administrative and only two of the prospects saw HR as the glue of the company that supports the business. Only one prospect had bought HR services before and one prospect mentioned the possibility of buying HR services if they also included financial management services.

For most research participants HR meant recruitment (for IT and engineering prospects) and an HR service that was seen possible to outsource was recruitment. However, HR is much more than just recruitment. Perhaps why so many research participants discussed only about recruitment services was because it is more common to outsource recruitment function rather than HR. Furthermore, many prospects did not see problems in HR, and if there were some, they were mainly in HR work taking much time of the person who was doing it in addition to their own job. HR meant HRM for many research participants, therefore, prospects should be educated about HR and that it is more than just making contracts and recruitment. It could be concluded that overall knowledge of HR is not that high. Furthermore, it is difficult to make prospects

to buy or even get them interested in buying HR services if they have not even considered buying those services or do not see their value.

8 CONCLUSIONS

Due to the nature of professional service firms and high interaction between the supplier and the customer company (Løwendahl, Revang & Fosstenløyken, 2001), it can be concluded that only inbound marketing is not a viable option. However, it should be utilised with relationship marketing and traditional marketing to create synergy and to get the best results. The results of this thesis showed that inbound marketing is especially important in the first three stages of the pre-purchase customer journey (*engagement, education, research*) to facilitate the search for information and to provide prospects content that is valuable and interesting for them before any personal contact with the supplier company has been made.

Even though inbound marketing has become a trending topic, other marketing tactics should not be ignored. Therefore, traditional marketing tactics can be utilised in the first stage of the customer journey to reach more prospects. Dakouan et al. (2019) discovered as well that inbound and traditional marketing are complementary, although inbound marketing was still seen as more important. The results of the research also revealed that from the *evaluation* stage onwards, the emphasis is also on the experts of the supplier company. The service is not only evaluated by the service itself but by the experts of the supplier company. Therefore, it should be noted how the experts sell the service in the supplier company and how they manage customer relationships and increase these skills also by developing a knowledge base. After all, the experts of PSFs are the ones who create value for customers (Løwendahl, Revang & Fosstenløyken, 2001).

The results of this thesis support previous research regarding the customer journey since the customer journey stages during the analysis stayed the same, and the data gathered with this research fit well the already established customer journey stages. Furthermore, the hourglass shape of the Deasi's (2016) customer journey puts emphasis on the first stages of the customer journey, which was also seen with the results of this thesis. The emphasis on marketing actions is the highest on the first stages of the pre-purchase customer journey, and after the first stages, also relationship marketing is required. Research by Gartner revealed that over 80% of B2B customers utilise online channels even at late stages in their customer journeys to search for more

information (Bryan, 2018). Results of the thesis revealed that content marketing was important in the last stages of prospects' customer journeys in addition to relationship marketing. This proves that customers access information even at the last stages of the customer journey before purchase and the supplier company must make sure to provide the information prospects seek online.

In previous research regarding services, the focus has been on value creation and how PSF can create value for its customers by taking into consideration the value creation processes of the customers (Hirvonen & Helander, 2001). The results of this thesis support this view since some prospects evaluated the service by how the service can improve their own value creation processes, i.e., will the service enhance eNPS. The supplier company must therefore be capable of detecting the value creation processes of the customer and align the service with these to create value for them. At the end, customers determine the value of the services and the value is determined by the fact how well the supplier company can meet the expectations of the customer (Trasorras, Weinstein & Abratt, 2009).

PSFs cannot overlook new forms of marketing and they must be implemented in their marketing strategies. The results of this thesis support this view and this view must be taken into consideration when planning marketing activities. The research revealed that new forms of marketing, i.e., social media, were most important for IT prospects and not as important for architecture and engineering prospects. Perhaps the industry of the prospect determines also what marketing choices the supplier company should make. For instance, the IT industry is a fast developing one and the marketing choices and channels of PSFs need to reflect the industry, hence, also use modern methods. Whereas architecture and engineering industries can be considered to be more traditional and therefore the PSFs should also utilise more traditional marketing methods to reach these customers the best and to help them progress on their customer journeys.

Previous research has also emphasised the importance of WOM in the B2B context. When customer satisfaction is high, it increases WOM, which in turn facilitates customer acquisition (Wangenheim, & Bayón, 2007). The importance of WOM in the customer journeys of prospects was also seen with the results of this thesis. On many

of the customer journey stages, WOM was required and therefore, it is also important in the professional services context. Other more interactive marketing communication tactics besides WOM - online review forum and SEO – also increase service firms customer acquisition rate (Majid, 2020). As all of the prospects turned to Google when searching for information, it is crucial for PSF to apply SEO as one of their marketing tactics to be found by the prospects on search engines. Furthermore, many of the prospects wanted to hear others' reviews of the service and the supplier company, therefore it is important to be present on online forums. The results of this thesis fill the gap on the study of interaction between service supplier companies and prospects in the pre-purchase phase of the relationship. However, customer acquisition is not much examined in service research and it requires further attention.

This thesis provided a more practical contribution on how to define the pre-customer journey of prospects and what it requires from marketing. The managerial implications from the results of this thesis can give guidance for people working in PSF either as in marketing or as an expert who provides the service for the customer. Marketers must understand the problems of the prospects to produce content that is valuable and interesting for them and know in which channels they want to be engaged with so that the prospects are susceptible to the supplier company's marketing messages. This thesis provides practical examples of how the customer journeys of prospects can be investigated and utilised when designing marketing tactics. As for the experts of the PSF, they must realise the importance of managing the customer relationship and communicate well with customers, since personal relations and the level of communication was important for prospects.

8.1 Limitations

It can be concluded that the results of the thesis are indicative since only eight research participants were interviewed. When using qualitative research approaches, the disadvantage is that the results cannot be generalised to the same degree as results gained with quantitative analysis can be (Ochieng, 2009). Other aspects that must be assessed in the quality of qualitative research is whether research participants' perspectives have been well represented, whether the interpretations are made from the primary data that was gathered, if the findings fit the data context they were derived

from, and if research participants were authentic and transparent when answering (Fossey et al., 2002). To better represent the research participants' answers, citations were utilised in the analysis to support the findings. The primary data that was gathered with semi-structured interviews was used as a foundation to create the customer journeys for each prospect and to avoid false misinterpretations. A possibility lies in for the research participants to not be completely authentic and transparent when the question of problems in HR was posed during the interviews. It may be that some research participants were uncomfortable to answer this questions since it was stated at the beginning of the interview that the thesis is conducted for a company. This could mean that they did not trust the anonymity of the answers and were afraid of the supplier company gaining information they were not comfortable to share.

Although abductive research strategy has many good benefits there are also some risks. The abductive research strategy allows the interviewer to get immersed in the data, and this can result in a bias in the investigation during interpretation. This can be avoided when the researcher is receptive to the interviewees' subjective experiences, however, that can also result in losing touch with already established concepts and prior research. (Chamberlain, 2006.) To avoid biases during the interpretation and not to lose touch with already established concepts and prior research, the pre-knowledge of the customer journey was used in the creation of interview guide and analysis.

The semi-structured interviews must be considered as well to assess the credibility of the results of this thesis. Conducting interviews may result in biases in the way the interview is conducted, how the interviewees are selected and if the interviewer has at some point influenced the interview process (Ryan, Coughlan & Cronin, 2009). To avoid biases during interviews, all the interviews were conducted in the same manner and the interview guide helped the interviewer to stay on the right topics. The questions posed during the interviews were open-ended in order not to influence the answers of the research participants. Furthermore, to avoid biases and to have an accurate and clear interview, a schedule and documentation is necessary (Ryan, Coughlan & Cronin, 2009). Therefore, all interviews were recorded to collect all the primary data and not to make misinterpretations during the analysis process.

8.2 Suggestions for future research

As this research concentrated only on the pre-purchase stages of the customer journey, more research on how to define the after-purchase stages when buying professional services and what it requires from marketing is necessary. To study what is the role of inbound marketing in those stages or are other marketing tactics needed to help customers become advocates of the company after purchase. As there is not much research on how to define the pre-purchase customer journey stages of prospects, more research could be done to support the findings of this research. Most of the research regarding value creation in the service business is concentrating on how a PSF can create value for already existing customers, therefore, it should be studied how a PSF can create value for its prospects. The value creation should be studied from various aspects, besides defining the pre-purchase customer journey stages and making suitable inbound marketing suggestions. Furthermore, it could be studied through which other aspects the interaction can be increased in the pre-purchase phase, and how the customer acquisition can be enhanced in the professional services context.

REFERENCES

- Aarikka-Stenroos, L., & Jaakkola, E. (2012). Value co-creation in knowledge intensive business services: A dyadic perspective on the joint problem solving process. *Industrial marketing management*, 41(1), 15-26.
- Agnihotri, R., Dingus, R., Hu, M. Y., & Krush, M. T. (2016). Social media: Influencing customer satisfaction in B2B sales. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 53, 172-180.
- Andersson, T., Boedeker, M., & Vuori, V. (2017). Emotion-gauge: Analyzing affective experiences in B2B customer journeys. In *Strategic Innovative Marketing* (pp. 31-36). Springer, Cham.
- Bakhtieva, E. (2017). B2B digital marketing strategy: a framework for assessing digital touch points and increasing customer loyalty based on Austrian companies from heating, ventilation and air conditioning industry. *Oeconomia Copernicana*, 8(3), 463-478.
- Berman, B. (2020). Paths to Purchase: The Seven Steps of Customer Purchase Journey Mapping. *Rutgers Business Review*, 5(1), 84-100.
- Berthon, P., & John, J. (2006). From entities to interfaces. *The service-dominant logic of marketing: Dialog, debate and directions*, 196-207.
- Bigshot Inbound. (2016). What is Inbound Marketing? And How Can it Help You Specifically? Retrieved from <https://agencyh.com/what-is-inbound/>.
- Brenner, M. (2019). 24 B2B Lead Generation Strategies to Implement in 2020. Retrieved from <https://marketinginsidergroup.com/content-marketing/b2b-lead-generation-strategies/0>.
- Bruhn, M., Schnebelen, S., & Schäfer, D. (2014). Antecedents and consequences of the quality of e-customer-to-customer interactions in B2B brand communities. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 43(1), 164-176.
- Bryan, J. (2018). What sales should know about modern B2B buyers.
- Burnard, P. (1991). A method of analysing interview transcripts in qualitative research. *Nurse education today*, 11(6), 461-466.
- Cambra-Fierro, J., Melero-Polo, I., & Sese, F. J. (2018). Customer value co-creation over the relationship life cycle. *Journal of Service Theory and Practice*.
- Chamberlain, G. P. (2006). Researching strategy formation process: An abductive methodology. *Quality and quantity*, 40(2), 289-301.

- Colicev, A., Kumar, A. & O'Connor, P. (2019). Modeling the relationship between firm and user generated content and the stages of the marketing funnel. *International journal of research in marketing*, 36(1), 100-116. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2018.09.005>.
- Dakouan, C., Benabdelouahed, R., & Anabir, H. (2019). Inbound marketing vs. outbound marketing: independent or complementary strategies. *Expert Journal of Marketing*, 7(1).
- Deasi, G. (2016). Understanding the Stages of the New Digital Marketing Funnel. Retrieved from <http://customerjourneymarketer.com/new-digital-marketing-funnel-stages/>.
- Diba, H., Vella, J. M., & Abratt, R. (2019). Social media influence on the B2B buying process. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*.
- DiCicco-Bloom, B., & Crabtree, B. F. (2006). The qualitative research interview. *Medical education*, 40(4), 314-321.
- Farruh, K. (2019). Consumer Life Cycle and Profiling: A Data Mining Perspective. In *Consumer Behavior and Marketing*. IntechOpen.
- Fossey, E., Harvey, C., McDermott, F., & Davidson, L. (2002). Understanding and evaluating qualitative research. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 36(6), 717-732.
- Gong, J. (2012). *Exploration of customer life cycle management and service applications*.
- Green, C. A., Duan, N., Gibbons, R. D., Hoagwood, K. E., Palinkas, L. A. & Wisdom, J. P. (2014). Approaches to Mixed Methods Dissemination and Implementation Research: Methods, Strengths, Caveats, and Opportunities. *Administration and policy in mental health and mental health services research*, 42(5), pp. 508-523. doi:10.1007/s10488-014-0552-6.
- Grönroos, C. (2000). Creating a relationship dialogue: communication, interaction and value. *The marketing review*, 1(1), 5-14.
- Grewal, R., Lilien, G. L., Bharadwaj, S., Jindal, P., Kayande, U., Lusch, R. F., ... & Sridhar, S. (2015). Business-to-business buying: Challenges and opportunities. *Customer needs and Solutions*, 2(3), 193-208.
- Guion, L. A., Diehl, D. C., & McDonald, D. (2001). Conducting an in-depth interview. McCarty Hall, FL: *University of Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences*, EDIS.
- Hirvonen, P., & Helander, N. (2001). Towards joint value creation processes in professional services. *The TQM Magazine*.

- Lapierre, J., Filiatrault, P., & Chebat, J. C. (1999). Value strategy rather than quality strategy: A case of business-to-business professional services. *Journal of Business Research*, 45(2), 235-246.
- Lee, K. W., Lanting, M. C. L., & Rojdamrongratana, M. (2017). Managing customer life cycle through knowledge management capability: a contextual role of information technology. *Total Quality Management & Business Excellence*, 28(13-14), 1559-1583.
- Lemon, K. N. & Verhoef, P. C. (2016). Understanding Customer Experience Throughout the Customer Journey. *Journal of marketing*, 80(6), pp. 69-96. doi:10.1509/jm.15.0420.
- Lingqvist, O., Plotkin, C. L., & Stanley, J. (2015). Do you really understand how your business customers buy. *McKinsey Quarterly*, 1, 74-85.
- Loredana, P. (2017). Inbound Marketing - the most important digital marketing strategy. *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Braşov. Series V, Economic science*, 9(58)(2), pp. 61-68.
- Ludwig, T., Wang, X., Kotthaus, C., Harhues, S., & Pipek, V. (2017). User Narratives in Experience Design for a B2B Customer Journey Mapping. *Mensch und Computer 2017-Tagungsband*.
- Lusch, R. F. & Vargo, S. L. (2011). Service-dominant logic — a guiding framework for inbound marketing. *Marketing Review St. Gallen*, 26(6), pp. 6-10. doi:10.1007/s11621-009-0094-6.
- Løwendahl, B. R., Revang, Ø., & Fosstenløkken, S. M. (2001). Knowledge and value creation in professional service firms: A framework for analysis. *Human relations*, 54(7), 911-931.
- Majid, K. A. (2020). Effect of interactive marketing channels on service customer acquisition. *Journal of Services Marketing*.
- McNamara, C. (2009). General guidelines for conducting interviews. Retrieved from <http://managementhelp.org/evaluatn/interview.htm>.
- Miles, M.B. & Huberman, A.M. (1994). *Qualitative Data Analysis: an expanded sourcebook*. Sage, Thousand Oaks.
- Noble, S., Cooperstein, D., & Kemp, M. B. (2010). It's time to bury the marketing funnel. *Steven Noble's Blog*, 2015.
- Ong, B. K. (2012). Grounded Theory Method (GTM) and the Abductive Research Strategy (ARS): a critical analysis of their differences. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 15(5), 417-432.

- Ochieng, P. A. (2009). An Analysis Of The Strengths And Limitation Of Qualitative And Quantitative *Research Paradigms. Problems of Education in the 21st Century*, 13, p. 13.
- Palmatier, R. W. (2008). *Relationship marketing* (pp. 1-140). Cambridge, MA: Marketing Science Institute.
- Payne, A. F., Storbacka, K. & Frow, P. (2007). Managing the co-creation of value. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 36(1), pp. 83-96. doi:10.1007/s11747-007-0070-0.
- Peet, J. G. (2016). Digital and the Traditional Marketing Funnel. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/william-joseph/digital-and-the-traditional-marketing-funnel-5f498307d9d6>.
- Queirós, A., Faria, D., & Almeida, F. (2017). Strengths and limitations of qualitative and quantitative research methods. *European Journal of Education Studies*.
- Rao, S., & Perry, C. (2002). Thinking about relationship marketing: where are we now?. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*.
- Ryan, F., Coughlan, M., & Cronin, P. (2009). Interviewing in qualitative research: The one-to-one interview. *International Journal of Therapy and Rehabilitation*, 16(6), 309-314.
- Salomonson, N., Åberg, A., & Allwood, J. (2012). Communicative skills that support value creation: A study of B2B interactions between customers and customer service representatives. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 41(1), 145-155.
- Sapian, A., & Vyshnevskaya, M. (2019). The marketing funnel as an effective way of a business strategy. *ΛΟΓΟΣ. The art of scientific mind*.
- Soegoto, E. S. & Simbolon, T. (2018). *Inbound Marketing as a Strategy in Digital Advertising*.
- Storbacka, K., Sivula, P., & Kaario, K. (1999). *Create value with strategic accounts*. Kauppakaari.
- Temkin, B. D. (2010). Mapping the customer journey. *Forrester Research*, 3.
- Tincher, J. (2013). Creating a Customer-Focused Customer Experience Journey Map. *Heart of the Customer*, Minneapolis.
- TODOR, R. D. (2016). Blending traditional and digital marketing. *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Braşov. Series V, Economic science*, 9(58)(1), pp. 51-56.
- Trasorras, R., Weinstein, A., & Abratt, R. (2009). Value, satisfaction, loyalty and retention in professional services. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*.

- Turner III, D. W. (2010). Qualitative interview design: *A practical guide for novice investigators. The qualitative report*, 15(3), 754.
- Vieira, V. A., de Almeida, M. I. S., Agnihotri, R., & Arunachalam, S. (2019). In pursuit of an effective B2B digital marketing strategy in an emerging market. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 47(6), 1085-1108.
- VINEREAN, S. & OPREANA, A. (2015). A New Development in Online Marketing: Introducing Digital Inbound Marketing. *Expert Journal of Marketing*, 3(2), pp. 35-50.
- Wangenheim, F. V., & Bayón, T. (2007). The chain from customer satisfaction via word-of-mouth referrals to new customer acquisition. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 35(2), 233-249.
- Wang, W. H. (2008). The interrelationship of retailer's relationship efforts and consumers' attitude and behavior. *Measuring Business Excellence*.
- Yu, T. W. (2011, July). A study of relationship marketing types, service quality, and relationship quality on customer loyalty in the life insurance industry. *In Proceedings in the 15TH Annual Conference Asia-Pacific Risk and Insurance Association* (Vol. 31).
- Yu, T. W., & Tung, F. C. (2013). Investigating effects of relationship marketing types in life insurers in Taiwan. *Managing Service Quality: An International Journal*.
- Zafer, A. S. (2015). *Authentic customer centricity: A journey towards sustainable customer experience*. Charlotte, North Carolina: Information Age Publishing Inc.
- Zolkiewski, J., Story, V., Burton, J., Chan, P., Gomes, A., Hunter-Jones, P., ... & Robinson, W. (2017). Strategic B2B customer experience management: the importance of outcomes-based measures. *Journal of Services Marketing*.

APPENDIX 1**OUTLINE OF A SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW**

(Engagement):

- 1) When you are searching for a new service provider, on which channels or medias you would like to know about professional services?

(Education):

- 2) Who is responsible for HR work in the company?
- 3) (If done in addition to another job): What kind of effects have you noticed occurring when HR work is handled in addition to another job description?
Any problems or challenges?
- 4) (If dedicated HR worker): What are the common challenges faced by the HR?
- 5) Could outside HR service provider help with something?

(Research):

- 6) If you were to buy HR services, where would you try to find information about those services from?
- 7) What would you want to know about those services in that situation?

(Evaluation):

- 8) Do you compare different services and service providers before buying? How is the comparison done?
- 9) What would you expect from HR services?

(Justification):

- 10) To justify the buying of HR service, what benefits would it have to bring to the company?
- 11) If there were multiple HR service providers, on what basis would you select the provider?

(Purchase):

- 12) Who are typically involved in a purchase decision of professional services?
- 13) How is the final purchase decision made?
- 14) What HR service providers come to your mind?